THE PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE OF LANGUAGE

'Miscommunication Trilogy'
Volume I

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WHEN IT COMES TO GENERAL LANGUAGE, FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION! – IT COMES STANDARD.
PLAIN SPEAKING AND CLEAR UNDER-STANDING
HUMAN
AB

'THE CONSPIRACY OF SPEECH'

by

Peter Ayolov

THE PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE OF LANGUAGE,
'MISCOMMUNICATION TRILOGY'
Volume I
'THE CONSPIRACY OF SPEECH' (Rough draft)
by Peter Ayolov

(The Conspiracy of Speech, The Planned Obsolescence of Language, Vol.I)

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(This book could not have been completed in English without the invaluable assistance of ChatGPT and Grammarly, whose support in writing and editing made the entire process possible —ironically, a book about human language made possible by machines that process it. — The Author)

Foreword: DEAD MEN'S UTOPIAS

'All the power of the first three decades of the twentieth century had lain in the word. There had been hardly a speech, a book, a newspaper article, or a lecture that had not contained some kind of prophecy. But none of them came true'.
— Elias Canetti, Crowds and Power

'The language of totalitarian regimes is, by its nature, contaminated: full of clichés, slogans, and mechanical repetition. It is a language that prevents thinking'.
— George Steiner, Language and Silence

'Every word in political language has a slippery, variable meaning. Words like freedom, democracy, and justice are not definable by reference to any fixed reality'.
— George Orwell, Politics and the English Language

'The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class'.
— Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology

Dusty bookcases

The Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' in Bulgaria is a beautiful 19th-century building next to the university botanical garden in the centre of Sofia. In 2014, when finishing my first book, 'The Economic Policy of Online Media, Manufacturing Dissent', I moved to a temporary new office due to a renovation. My 'new' office looked old with its bulky and dusty bookcases, their shelves stacked with books, magazines, old dissertations, and graduation theses. In a moment of procrastination and doubting the merits of my book, I decided to examine the inside of the oldest and dustiest bookcases. Except for the half-empty bottles from some academic parties, they were crowded with outdated ideology and propaganda. The dustier layer held numerous books from the era of the socialist People's Republic of Bulgaria, featuring the most luxurious editions published by the official publishers of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The most intriguing detail was that they could be easily classified ideologically by the years of the Communist Party Congresses in Bulgaria. You could trace the new party line with new plans and goals, the new enemies, and friends, and the emerging new subideologies with their new buzzwords and slogans. The newest books inside the bookcases were dated around 1989.

In 1990, the XIV Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party took place, after which it changed its name to the Bulgarian Socialist Party. It was the end of the People’s Republic. Some of the less dusty books on the shelves were published between 1990 and the present, spanning the thirty-four years of liberal democracy in the Republic of Bulgaria. After a glance at them, it turned out that you can also classify them according to the current trends in political ideologies since the 1990s. There were no official party publishing houses, but the political bias was evident, and there was evident support from different grants and foundations, just to check your ideological compass. To be honest, my first thought was that my book would end up on these shelves one day, and I was right. After that, it occurred to me that the ideological language was

not so different before and after 1990. The buzzwords, slogans, values, and beliefs were opposite in meaning, but the structure of persuasion and propaganda was similar. Even the names of some of the authors were the same. Switching sides after the fall of the Iron Curtain was natural. It is the most human thing to do. The ruling ideas are always the ideas of the ruling parties. The most published books are always the politically correct ones. If you want your books to be published over the years, you must rotate as a "political weathercock".

Publish and perish

But were the authors more honest before or after 1990? Or was it all like 'Havel's Greengrocer', writing slogans just for career development or even as a fashion? In his 1978 Harvard address, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn critiqued[1] the West scientists for focusing excessively on career development, without moral responsibility to society: 'Legally, your researchers are free, but they are conditioned by the fashion of the day. There is no open violence, such as in the East; however, a selection dictated by fashion and the need to match mass standards frequently prevents independent-minded people from making their contribution to public life. There is a dangerous tendency to flock together and shut off successful development'. So, what is the difference between political bias in academic writing then and now? Today, you can also choose your research topic dictated by the fashion of political correctness and the need to match the standards of the ruling ideology. From a linguistic perspective, the concept of 'political correctness' appears to stem from the intention to avoid marginalising certain identity groups through language. The linguistic relativity hypothesis suggests that our thought processes shape our perception of reality and are, in turn, shaped by the language we use. This means that language not only reflects our worldview but also reveals and reinforces our implicit biases. The use of biased language perpetuates ill effects in the ideological group and must be censored or cancelled. In the bubble of the group speak the individual is indoctrinated as in a cult. Every ideological language has a performative effect on its user, even if he is just pretending. Buzzwords and slogans work even if you do not believe or even understand them.

Many of these "political weathercock" authors are gone, and their books will be forgotten. What will be the fate of these luxurious editions of books full of outdated dead men's utopias? You do not have to burn books to destroy a culture, just get people to stop reading them, says Ray Bradbury. You just take the old propaganda books off the shelves and pile them inside the bookcases. For sure, only a few people will read them, or only a few people will flip through. These books were part of the power structure of society and lost their meaning as this structure disintegrated. The ideas of the ruling parties suddenly become just an information waste. It is like a tower of books and words that holds the political system and then collapses. They become only a memory of a stillborn utopia. But why are new utopias so important for mankind? The books that are still on the shelves are using the same ideological language of propaganda, promising another bright future. In order to unite large groups of people, a common language must build utopias. It is like an inherent quality of every complex language. One utopia is not enough. It is always plural because the original utopia is upgraded with time and changes constantly. The coming new ideology must replace the old one. The failed promises must be replaced with new slogans and buzzwords. The old ones are buried under a heap of information

[1] Solzhenitsyn, A. (1978). Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Center — A World Split Apart. [online] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Center. Available at: https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/a-world-split-apart.

waste. So, it is a constant building of castles made of words, which eventually melt into the sea of languages. As if the ideologies are made to break just to keep the concept of utopia alive. The stories clash and fade away, but the language is the same. Every ideological language has an inherent kill switch to destroy any creation myth or political philosophy if it poses a threat to the semantic equilibrium. Every complex system of words is reduced to an empty slogan that expires with time and needs to be forgotten and replaced. It is a constant cycle of new and new beliefs with short periods of disbelief. Periodical manufacture of consent and dissent. Communication is a condition for social life, along with miscommunication. Utopias turned into dystopias. Wisdom is followed by stupidity.

Nonsensical propositions

This latent dysfunction of speech and systemic distortion of communication can be called a planned obsolescence of language and is a premise for a proposed miscommunication axiom. The research on the planned obsolescence of language follows the tradition of the critique of language and the ideas of Fritz Mauthner and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is not critical of the language itself as a tool for communication but of the use of ideological language as a political weapon for indoctrination, control, and domination. This type of linguistic weapon is penetrating all levels of human societies across the world. There is no great hope for future change and creation of a more just world information order. What is more foreseeable is that every dangerous idea and every ideological language anticipates its destruction. Wittgenstein put his faith in the inherent quality of complex language to create nonsense and tautologies. Eventually, in time, language will cancel itself out. In philosophy, this metaphor is called Wittgenstein's ladder[2], because of proposition 6.54 of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright'. Every linguistic construction has a possibility for miscommunication that can lead to destruction. Every story can be used for domination and bring miscommunication. Even those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Even free access to written history and mass education cannot guarantee that the same old propaganda slogans from every pole of the political spectrum will not be used again. The phenomenon of collective stupidity is becoming even more evident with mass communication and social networks. Real-time translation and the monopoly of standard languages make people more susceptible to irrational forces, whether intentionally or not. We should never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups, says George Carlin. This is like the phenomenon of the stupidity of crowds, where the average intelligence level of individuals united in a crowd tends to the lower limit of the group. Collective stupidity is the side effect of large language communities and especially in periods of digital globalisation. Today, the linguistic groups are getting larger, with half of the population of the world speaking less than 25 official languages from the seven thousand still existing and thousands of dialects. It looks like nothing can protect people from the monopoly of global languages. There is no

[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Russell, B. and Charles Kay Ogden (1992). Tractacus logico-philosophicus. London; New York: Routledge.

way back towards plain speaking and clear understanding of small group dialects. Tearing down the linguistic tower of power and stupidity seems like a utopia.

Chauffeurs' knowledge

Novelty is the ultimate principle of language. Everything possible to be said will be said, just because of the novelty principle. New and new ideologies and stories will be invented and will replace the old ones, no matter if they are better or more meaningful. The increasing complexity of standard languages leads to systemic miscommunication. Collective stupidity is not just ignorance but a choice. Striving to be ignorant together with the thousands and millions around you. The madness and stupidity of the crowds are not something that can be controlled by the educated elites. This can be illustrated with the old Max Planck's Chauffeur Test anecdote. As a part of a joke, the chauffeur memorised the words and gave a public lecture on the new quantum mechanics, pretending to be Professor Plank. When asked a question by the crowd, he said that the question is so easy that even his chauffeur can reply, pointing towards Max Planck. But what was the goal of this public lecture on quantum mechanics? To make the audience understand quantum mechanics. Or to propagate a faith in science and to promote the name of a Nobel Prize winner. To know the name of something is different from knowing the thing. Any public speaking is addressed to the audience as a group. What if it turns out that the crowd likes the speech of the chauffeur better? What if the audience is made up of chauffeurs only? What will be the taste of these audiences if they grow in numbers? Will the size of the crowd affect the content of the lecture?

The growing number of 'chauffeurs' listening to lectures influences the speakers and their language. Every influencer is influenced by their audience, and the speeches of every dictator are dictated by the crowds. Is it possible for the speaker to control the masses with logic and rationality only? It works with small groups of educated people who trust each other. The growing number of listeners diminished the freedom of the speaker as he was required to speak in a way that reflected the feelings and desires of the crowd. A splendid example is the final speech in the movie 'The Great Dictator'. It is unclear whether the speech was meant as a sincere call for peace and democracy or as a subtle warning about the dangerous allure of rhetoric. The fact that any ordinary person (a barber, or a painter like Hitler) can use language to promise utopia and peace, yet lead the masses toward war and destruction, highlights the peril of persuasive speech. In this light, the voice of power emerges as something far greater and more dangerous than any individual. The voice of power as a mystic unifying force, regardless of the content of the speech. It reveals the unsettling truth that language, when wielded before the masses, can control and manipulate even the most well-intentioned of men. Chaplin was acutely aware of the human voice not as a sublime, ethereal medium for expressing the depths of human subjectivity, but as a foreign intruder—something that disrupts and controls us. It is not the man who controls the voice of power, but rather the voice and language that exert control over the man. When Chaplin's character delivers his speech advocating for love and mutual understanding, there is a double irony. The people applaud his words in the same way they had cheered for Hynkel. Furthermore, the music accompanying this humanist message is the overture to Wagner's 'Lohengrin', the same music that plays during Hynkel's daydreams of world conquest with the globe-shaped balloon. This unsettling parallel reveals the voice's power to shape, manipulate, and even control human behaviour, blurring the lines between good

and evil, between genuine human connection and the seductive allure of totalitarian rhetoric. People are forever under the spell of their voice and language. When the hollow premise of every utopia is revealed, the language of propaganda cannot hold its users together. Gradually, the meaning of slogans disappears, and they eventually become just road signs. The unbearable lightness of language is revealed.

Can you trust your thoughts?

The utopia of communication is based on the myth that it can be a perfect language. The most dangerous side of any ideology is that using divine words is an excuse to stop thinking. Following commands is a matter of faith, and people honour that form of voluntary ignorance. The utopian and ideological language permeates all spheres of today's society. This divine language, which has historically served as a tool for crafting new utopian visions, gets cancelled by itself. The cyclical process of reconstructing ideologies is essential for knowledge production in power systems. As Terhi Rantanen (2024) argues in 'Dead Men's Propaganda[3]', each generation leaves behind a linguistic residue—once visionary, now fossilised—that reveals the ideological dreams and illusions of its time. What was once a call to utopia becomes a relic, awaiting reinterpretation by those who inherit its forgotten codes. This "dead men's language" becomes part of your inner dialogue as a mechanism of control exerted by societal voices you have internalised, which are often not your own. These voices — representing influential societal figures — create commands within your mind, constantly demanding that you conform to societal expectations. This internal cacophony is designed to ensure that you seek validation from society. Your inner voices demand that you fulfil society's stereotype. Society uses language as a tool to shape and control your inner world. Using language, societal leaders and institutions influence how you think about yourself as a form of conditioning. Quiet experiences of silence and mindfulness, that are outside the societal propaganda machine, are deemed dangerous. Society thrives on motion, consumption, anxiety, and dissatisfaction, so inevitably the language serves this purpose. It relies on you being restless, incomplete, and always striving for more, whereas moments of happiness are still, quiet, and self-contained. In peace and silence, you can find your voice and escape from the oppressive control of societal language with its expectations and commands. The question is, can you trust your thoughts?

By rejecting these inner voices of power, you risk being marginalised or dismissed. Even simply pointing out the wrongs in society could result in being labelled insane. This is an inversion where truth-tellers are discredited while harmful, outdated ideologies and 'dead men's utopias' govern the actions of global powers. John Lennon's statement[4] in a 1968 BBC-2 interview highlights the role of individual thinking: 'I think our society is run by insane people for insane objectives. And I think that's what I sussed when I was sixteen and twelve, way down the line. But I expressed it differently all through my life. It's the same thing I'm expressing all the time. But now I can put it into that sentence that I think we're being run by maniacs for maniacal ends, you know. If anybody can put on paper what our government, and the American

[3] Rantanen, T. (2024). Dead Men's Propaganda. LSE Press.

[4] www.beatlesinterviews.org. (n.d.). John Lennon Interview: Release 6/6/1968 - Beatles Interviews Database. [online] Available at: http://www.beatlesinterviews.org/db1968.0606.beatles.html./ [Accessed 9 Sep. 2024].

government, and the Russian, Chinese... what they are all trying to do, and what they think they're doing, I'd be very pleased to know what they think they're doing. I think they're all insane. But I am liable to be put away as insane for expressing that, you know. That's what is insane about it. I mean, don't you agree?' Intriguingly, Lennon mentions governments' inability to 'put on paper' what they are doing because it highlights how their objectives are so irrational or absurd that they defy coherent explanations. This speaks to the idea that much of their language is either deliberately vague or meaningless, masking the true nature of their actions. Lennon's critique suggests that the language used by governments is not just unclear but intentionally obfuscates reality, making it impossible to transparently communicate their goals. This reflects the broader concept of miscommunication, where language is distorted to maintain power and control, rendering it absurd and disconnected from truth. This 'planned obsolescence' reflects a language that no longer functions to foster understanding but instead serves to obscure, control, and perpetuate power. In this sense, the madness and absurdity Lennon describes are not accidental, but rather a symptom of how language itself is manipulated until it becomes ineffective, as a sign of the collapse of overly complex, disconnected political discourse. The irony is that Lennon, who denounced the madness of power and the incoherence of political language, later dressed himself in the same symbolic power—preaching a utopia in 'Imagine' that erased religion, property, and nations with a language as vague and totalising as the systems he once condemned. Steely Dan's 'Only a Fool Would Say That' mocked Lennon, exposing how even the fiercest critics can become mouthpieces of the very abstractions they once questioned: 'A world become one of salads and sun, only a fool would say that; A boy with a plan, a natural man, wearing a white Stetson hat'.

Self-consuming concepts

The hope that new generations will break free from the interplay between ideology and utopia in big societies is also part of utopian thinking. The intellectual span of a generation often exceeds its biological one, making it difficult to fully break away from the ideological language that has been inherited. Nevertheless, the obsolescence of ideological language is a necessary component of intellectual progress. It allows for the continuous renewal of ideas and the reimagining of utopian visions, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge remains dynamic and ever-evolving. In this way, the cycle of ideological language and its eventual obsolescence serves not as a barrier, but as a catalyst for the ongoing transformation of speech and thought. The idea of 'Self-Consuming Concepts[5]' can be intriguingly connected to the obsolescence of language, a notion that suggests language and the concepts it conveys are deliberately designed or evolved to become obsolete, outdated, or self-destructive over time. The idea of self-consuming concepts revolves around the idea that certain philosophical ideas contain the seeds of their demise. Similarly, the planned obsolescence of language implies that certain linguistic constructs are inherently unstable or designed to degrade over time. In both cases, the concepts or languages are not built to last but are instead expected to evolve, degrade, or be replaced.

[5] Magnus, B. (1989). Self-Consuming Concepts. International Studies in Philosophy, 21(2), pp.63–71. doi:https://doi.org/10.5840/intstudphil198921269.

Intrinsic instability, ambiguity, and obsolescence relate to language evolution and dialectical processes.

The dialectical nature of thought involves the creation, confrontation, and eventual synthesis or negation of concepts. Language undergoes a similar process, where words, meanings, and expressions evolve, confront new realities, and are eventually replaced. This evolution can be seen as a planned or inevitable obsolescence, where older forms of language are consumed and replaced by new ones. This is a meta-ideological process and affects all knowledge production. For example, even religious traditions with a span of thousands of years are marked with periodical changes of the canon to fit the zeitgeist. These changes are often the result of the obsolescence of the old doctrines. Ideological language, which often tries to encapsulate complex ideas and systems of belief, can be particularly prone to self-consumption. When taken to their logical extremes, these concepts may implode under their contradictions. In the context of language, this can manifest as slogans or buzzwords that lose their meaning or become counterproductive over time. Planned obsolescence of language can thus be seen as a natural consequence of the self-consuming nature of these ideological constructs. This highlights the importance of cultural and temporal contexts. Just as a philosophical concept might be relevant in one era but become obsolete in another, language is also tied to its time and place. Words and phrases that are powerful in one context may become meaningless or even detrimental as contexts shift. The idea of self-consuming ideas also intersects with power dynamics. Those in power may intentionally craft language in a way that serves immediate purposes but is designed to be discarded or reinterpreted as needed. This controlled obsolescence allows for the manipulation of discourse, much like how self-consuming concepts can be used to maintain or challenge power structures. Both philosophical ideas and linguistic constructs can be designed or evolve to self-destruct over time. Whether through inherent contradictions or deliberate design, the instability and eventual obsolescence of language and concepts reveal the transient nature of both thought and communication. This interplay underscores the dynamic and often fleeting nature of the tools we use to understand and describe our world.

Cultural kill switch

The idea that the mechanism of self-consuming concepts could function as a safety trigger against the dangers posed by violent political ideologies of power and domination is a fascinating proposition. A built-in self-destruction of concepts and ideas to prevent the suffering and destruction of people and their environment. A hidden linguistic mechanism as a safeguard for the dark side of language. This concept suggests that the inherent instability or self-destructive tendencies within certain ideologies and linguistic constructs serve as a safeguard, preventing them from perpetuating unchecked harm over time. If auto-destructive concepts act as a built-in shutdown mechanism, they carry within them the seeds of their undoing. This means that as these ideologies or languages of power reach their zenith, they also approach a critical point where their internal contradictions, overreach, or inherent flaws cause them to collapse. This collapse could be seen as a natural protective mechanism, preventing the ideology from causing indefinite harm. The prevention of total domination of one ideology over a certain time and place. Totalitarian regimes and oppressive systems often rely on complex and manipulative language to maintain control. If the language itself is designed to self-consume

and expire, it would eventually undermine the system's ability to sustain its grip on power. As the language deteriorates (becoming increasingly hollow, contradictory, or meaningless), the ideology loses its ability to convincingly dominate the populace. A turning point of ideological exhaustion and widespread disillusionment is reached. Political ideologies, especially those that are violent or extreme, often have a limited lifespan due to their radical nature. The self-consuming nature of these ideologies ensures that they burn out rather than achieve stable, lasting dominance. It is time for a cultural and linguistic reset. As these ideologies and their associated languages consume themselves, they leave space for cultural and linguistic renewal.

The collapse of one system creates an opportunity for new, potentially more just, and balanced systems to emerge. This reset can be seen as a natural cycle, where the end of one ideological or linguistic era paves the way for original approaches that are less susceptible to the same pitfalls. Self-consuming concepts might also resist co-optation by oppressive forces. As an ideology or language becomes more rigid and dogmatic, it loses the flexibility that allowed it to gain power initially. This rigidity can lead to its downfall, as it becomes incapable of adapting to new challenges or internal dissent, further accelerating its decline. If we consider this mechanism as a deliberate or natural safeguard, it could imply that the very complexity and contradictions inherent in dominant ideologies and languages contain the blueprint for their downfall. This offers a more optimistic view of history and human society, suggesting that even the most oppressive systems are not invulnerable and are subject to eventual collapse due to their internal flaws. Understanding the self-consuming nature of harmful ideologies and languages could empower individuals and movements to expose these flaws, hastening the collapse of oppressive systems. It could also inform the creation of new ideologies and languages that are more resistant to corruption and more aligned with human values. The very traits that make certain ideologies and languages powerful also contain the potential for their undoing. This built-in obsolescence could be seen as a natural defence mechanism within the fabric of thought and communication. A cultural kill switch ensuring that no single ideology or language of power can maintain dominance indefinitely.

'As societies grow decadent, the language grows decadent, too. Words are used to disguise, not to illuminate, action: you liberate a city by destroying it. Words are to confuse, so that at election time people will solemnly vote against their own interests.'
-Gore Vidal, The Decline and Fall of the American Empire

Breaking the cycle

The idea of cultural cycles and the decay of dangerous political ideologies and complex systems of power can be connected historically to cycles of debt cancellation. Jubilees were seen as moments of revelation or apocalypse that exposed complex lies and myths, serving as a means of societal renewal and simplification. In the Old Testament, a Jubilee year was a year of liberation and restoration, occurring every 50 years. Debts were forgiven, slaves were freed, and the land was returned to its original owners. This practice, as described in the Book of Leviticus, was meant to reset the social and economic order, preventing the permanent accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few. It was a radical form of societal renewal, aimed at breaking cycles of exploitation and restoring balance. In many ancient societies, debt cancellation was seen not just as an economic necessity but as a moral and spiritual act. It was often portrayed as a moment of apocalypse—derived from the Greek word

'apokalypsis', meaning 'unveiling' or 'revelation'. These events revealed the underlying truths about the inequalities and injustices that had built up over time, stripping away the myths and complex justifications that had been used to maintain the status quo. Throughout history, societies have often fallen into periods of increasing complexity, where systems of debt, power, and language become so intricate and burdensome that they begin to collapse under their weight. The Jubilee or debt cancellation can be seen as a deliberate simplification—a way to clear the slate and start anew. This reset was not just economic but also cultural and linguistic, as it often involved the dismantling of the complex myths and ideologies that justified the existing order. Just as debt cycles build up unsustainable pressures that eventually require a reset, complex political ideologies and languages of power create a web of myths and lies that can only be maintained for so long. These ideologies, by their nature, are self-consuming because they create contradictions and tensions that cannot be indefinitely sustained. When these concepts reach a breaking point, they collapse, much like a society that can no longer bear the weight of its debts.

The simplification of these complex systems—whether through a Jubilee or the self-destruction of an ideology—serves as a revelation. It unveils the underlying truths that had been obscured by layers of abstraction and deception. This process of apocalypse leads to more honest human life, where the false complexities are stripped away, and society can return to fundamental and equitable principles. The historical cycles of debt cancellation and the concept of self-consuming ideologies both highlight a pattern of renewal through collapse. When systems become too complex and unjust, they eventually consume themselves, leading to a period of renewal. This renewal often involves a return to simpler, more honest ways of organising society—whether through the resetting of economic relations or the rejection of oppressive ideologies. The word revolution from Latin 'revolvere' (turn, roll back) from early 15c. means 'a cyclical reoccurrence, recurrent changes or events'. In the modern world, where economic systems, political ideologies, and even language itself can become overwhelmingly complex, the idea of a built-in kill switch that leads to renewal is increasingly relevant. The cyclical nature of these collapses serves as a reminder that complexity and power cannot grow indefinitely without consequence. Just as ancient societies used Jubilees to restore balance, there may be a need for contemporary forms of 'apocalypse' or revolutions that simplify and reset our social, economic, and political systems. The connection between self-consuming concepts, cycles of debt cancellation, and moments of revelation points to a deep historical pattern: as societies become more complex and dominated by intricate systems of power and language, they also create the conditions for their collapse. The revolutions serve as necessary resets that strip away the lies and myths, revealing the truth. This cyclical process of complexity leading to collapse and renewal is a powerful mechanism for maintaining balance and preventing the unchecked accumulation of knowledge, power, and domination.

Castles made of sand

Ideological language, much like the stories we tell ourselves, serves as a powerful tool in the continuous crafting of utopias—grand visions of perfect societies that reflect the ideals and dreams of those who conjure them. Yet, just as these utopian constructs emerge from the fertile imagination, they also carry within them the seeds of their obsolescence. Language, after all, is not static; it evolves, decays, and eventually falls uncoordinated with the ever-shifting realities

it seeks to describe. This planned obsolescence of language is not merely a flaw but a natural and necessary process. It allows for the perpetual cycle of constructing and deconstructing ideas. It ensures that the concept of utopia remains fluid, forever out of reach, and thus eternally compelling. However, the same language that builds utopias also constructs their darker counterparts—dystopias. These imagined worlds, often depicted as bleak and oppressive, offer a counterbalance to utopian ideals. Dystopias ground our utopian fantasies in a more sobering reality, reminding us that the pursuit of perfection can lead to its opposite. Dystopias may be closer to the truth of human experience, serving as cautionary tales that highlight the potential dangers of unchecked ideologies. The process of building and destroying these ideological 'castles made of sand' is a cyclical one. Ideologies are designed to be broken, their language intentionally ephemeral, to make room for innovative ideas and new visions. This cycle ensures that we are not trapped in the utopias of past generations that, if left unchallenged, could ossify into dystopias for the living. Thus, the obsolescence of language, miscommunication, and the inevitable decay of ideology are not merely signs of failure but indicators of a dynamic and adaptive culture. A culture that, through the continuous creation and destruction, maintains a balance between aspiration and reality. It is in this balance that we find the true value of language—as a tool for perpetual renewal.

By allowing concepts to consume themselves—to rise, reach their peak, and then fall into disuse or transformation—society creates space for the latest ideas, new voices, and new expressions. This cyclical process mirrors the eternal recurrence, where destruction is not an end but a precursor to rebirth. It is through this cyclical renewal that balance is preserved, ensuring that no single voice, idea, or concept can exert unchecked power over time. The Tower of Babel is doomed to collapse. In the poetic words of Jimi Hendrix, 'And so castles made of sand melt into the sea eventually'. The words of poets seem free from the corruption of the language of power and domination. But is it like that? Is poetry, literature, and speech as an art form the last sanctuary of the divine language that cannot harm? Poetry, often seen as a refined and sensitive art form, has also been a powerful tool for propaganda. Throughout history, dictators such as Nero, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Kim Il-sung, Radovan Karadžić, Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden have written poetry, using it to craft narratives that manipulate the emotions of their followers. While poetry is typically associated with beauty and delicacy, it can become a weapon of control, sentimentality, and even violence. Many powerful leaders also harboured artistic ambitions, channelling their frustrations into political agendas and mastering propaganda as a form of art. These leaders understood the emotional and symbolic power of verse, using it to humanise their power, justify their violence, and manipulate their people. Throughout history, poetry was used as a tool of control, revealing the unsettling connection between the language of the poet and the language of the dictator. The poetic language softened the edge of dictatorship, making their commands more palatable and even emotionally stirring. Poetry is just using the beauty of language to obscure the reality of oppression and aggression. The veil of romanticism slightly covers the cold logic of power, making the rhymes of poets both seductive and dangerous. At the end, the word 'dictator' comes directly from Latin dictare 'say often, prescribe', and dicere 'to say, speak'.

The great speech

The anecdote of the barber standing in for the dictator in 'The Great Dictator' highlights how language can humanise or dehumanise, depending on its intent. Charlie Chaplin's involvement in political discourse through 'The Great Dictator' reveals the complex intersection between art, propaganda, and power. As the United States hesitated to enter World War II, Chaplin, a British citizen, used his platform to criticise fascism and advocate for intervention, which led to his being accused of promoting pro-war propaganda[6]. His speeches, particularly his call for opening a second front in Europe, were interpreted by many as pro-Communist, especially in a political climate already suspicious of Soviet Russia. Chaplin's art and public statements were increasingly viewed through a political lens, leading to his exile from the United States. Ironically, the man who gave one of cinema's most famous speeches for humanity and freedom became a victim of the very political machinery he sought to critique. Chaplin's experience shows that the language of art, like the language of dictators, can be perceived as dangerous, especially when it challenges the political status quo. Thus, even as Chaplin sought to use his art for peace, it was co-opted into the narratives of propaganda, proving that no artistic expression exists in isolation from political consequences. Charlie Chaplin found his political voice with his first sound films, particularly in 'The Great Dictator'. Breaking the silence that had defined his career as the Tramp, Chaplin used his voice to deliver bold political messages. His transition from silent film to sound was not just a technical shift—it marked a deeper transformation where his art became explicitly political. He advocated for peace, unity, and democracy, but this newfound voice soon became controversial and even dangerous.

At the 1941 gala for Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration[7], Chaplin was invited to repeat his 'Great Dictator' speech, where he passionately declared, 'You, the people, have the power... let us all unite!' While this speech was intended as a plea for unity, it increasingly became viewed as politically charged, especially in the tense atmosphere of the time. Later, during a fundraiser for Russian war relief, Chaplin gave another speech, planned for just four minutes, but ended up speaking for forty, calling for unity across political ideologies to win the war. His remarks, including statements like 'if that's communism, there's a lot of people in the United States that'll vote for it', were seen as extremely dangerous in an era of growing suspicion. Chaplin, having long remained silent, now found himself unable to stop speaking, but his words were increasingly perceived as dangerous. Words in the mouths of popular figures shape the boundaries of what entire nations can achieve. It is said that no mother would willingly send her son to war without the influence of propaganda. What began as a speech for peace and unity in 'The Great Dictator' was later interpreted as war and communist propaganda, leading to mounting scrutiny. Chaplin's political voice, once seen as inspiring, became a source of controversy, contributing to his downfall in America. Chaplin faced accusations of communist sympathies, and his personal life, including a paternity suit and marriages to much younger

[6] Menand, L. (2023). The War on Charlie Chaplin. [online] The New Yorker. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/11/20/charlie-chaplin-vs-america-scott-eyman-book-review./(Accessed: 15 August 2024).

[7] Charlie Chaplin (2020). Charlie Chaplin - Speech from The Great Dictator at Franklin D. Roosevelt's Third Inaugural Gala. [online] YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQRThCFU5vQ [Accessed 4 Sep. 2024].

women, sparked public and media outrage. An FBI investigation followed, leading to his forced departure from the U.S. in 1952 and eventual relocation to Switzerland. After his exile, his films took on a noticeably darker tone. Having found his voice both artistically with sound cinema and politically through his beliefs, Chaplin became disillusioned, losing his once-hopeful faith in the future and the inherent goodness of people. It was as if the 'voice' of the dictator Hynkel had affected him. He came to realise that even his famous speech for unity and peace was just empty rhetoric in the face of the world's harsh political realities.

Tools of shallow thinking

In Plato's famous dialogue 'Phaedrus', Socrates questions the impact of writing on human memory and intelligence. He warns that it will lead to forgetfulness, as people will stop using their minds and instead rely on written records. People would seem knowledgeable but know extraordinarily little. Today, with the rise of computers and digital data, these concerns seem more relevant than ever. As soon as people could record their thoughts externally, they began to depend less on their own memory. Digital technology allows us to store and search for information and ideas, but it also encourages us to rely on these external sources instead of developing our internal cognitive abilities and personal emotional connections. These external tools simplify your thinking, making it shallow and superficial. Research[8] on Google's effects on memory has shown that when people know information is easily accessible, they tend to focus on where to find it rather than understanding the content itself. While these tools may free up mental space for higher-level thinking, they also reduce the brain's capacity for memory and intellectual effort. Using these mental prosthetics, you are not searching for information by yourself, so you do not remember your own path of knowledge. As a result, the internal cognitive abilities diminish. People hear and read more information than ever, but without engaging deeply, they risk becoming shallow thinkers[9]. The more complex the culture and language become through these technologies, the more human thoughts are reduced to simplistic ideas. Instead of enhancing our intelligence, climbing the Tower of Babel leaves us with a mind that is reliant, weakened, and unable to fully engage in deep or original thinking. Throughout history, every major communication technology—whether it is writing, the printing press, the telephone, television, the internet, or artificial intelligence—has promised to advance human intelligence and collective organisation. Yet rather than leading to enlightenment, these innovations often trigger cycles of intellectual and linguistic decline. However, this intellectual decline may serve as a protective mechanism. If every recent technology resulted in perfect understanding and organisation, the concentration of power could easily spiral into danger. The fragmentation and distraction created by each technological leap may prevent unchecked control and domination, offering a safeguard against the potential for self-destruction. Instead of pushing humanity toward dangerous levels of collective intelligence and power, this decay can keep ambitions in check, preserving a delicate balance between progress and safety.

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[8] Sparrow, B., Liu, J. and Wegner, D.M. (2011). Google Effects on Memory: Cognitive Consequences of Having Information at Our Fingertips. Science, [online] 333(6043), pp.776–778. doi:https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1207745.

[9] Carr, N. (2010). The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our brains. S.L.: W W Norton.

The Babel myth exposes the idea of the confusion of language. Wittgenstein's concept of 'private language' argues that language is only meaningful when shared by a group and becomes meaningless when used by an individual in isolation. But this is true in the sense that it is a small group of closely related people and that the individual can be isolated when he feels alienated in a big society. Language functions as an instrument that depends on social interaction for trust and support. Without a shared context, language can easily lead to confusion, miscommunication, and a breakdown in communities. When language is abstracted from the social framework that gives it meaning, it risks becoming fragmented and unclear, underscoring the importance of collective use in avoiding confusion. Rather than being something sacred or extraordinary, language is simply a tool, and every person, family, or group of friends could invent their own tool. The simple communication with 'private language' that binds us to those closest—our family, siblings, and friends—is more than enough to sustain meaningful relationships. Do we truly need anything more? Isn't a life rooted in these intimate connections sufficient? Or is a common life together no longer enough? Yet, people constantly seek more, driven by the complexity of our language. Going up the ladder of technology, our increasingly intricate words create confusion, isolation, and conflict. The higher people climb in search of meaning, the further they drift from the simple truths they once knew. Complex human communication creates new problems that simple language cannot solve.

Evil talk, simple talk

In his book 'Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk: How We Defeat Ourselves by the Way We Talk and What to Do About It[10]', Neil Postman examines how language can often be harmful and even destructive. He divides harmful speech into two categories: 'stupid talk', which results from careless mistakes and has limited, often immediate negative effects, and 'crazy talk', which is more dangerous. Crazy talk is persuasive and semantically sound but rooted in irrational or misleading assumptions, often promoting destructive ideas that distort reality. Postman argues that about half of all communication falls into these harmful categories, undermining real understanding and fostering conflict. Crazy talk is insidious because it creates simplistic, absolutist narratives—like framing complex relationships as oppressor and oppressed—that disregard the nuance of human experience. It traps people in its limited logic, making it difficult to question or escape. In this way, language can be a powerful tool of deception and manipulation, promoting division and irrational thinking. Postman suggests that much of the harm done by language is not just accidental but systemic, as crazy talk redefines the norms of communication, spreading destructive ideas that can have wide-reaching consequences. By recognising and resisting such talk, people can protect themselves from being misled or manipulated. But what about evil talk or 'evil language'? Language becomes truly evil when it is used to justify, defend, or normalise acts of violence, oppression, and cruelty, as often seen in political rhetoric and propaganda. Politicians, propagandists, and other influencers can manipulate language to rationalise atrocities like torture and killing, cloaking these actions in

[10] Postman, N. (1977). Crazy talk, stupid talk : how we defeat ourselves by the way we talk and what to do about it. New York: Dell.

terms that make them seem necessary or even virtuous. By reframing violence as 'defence' or 'protection', and labelling enemies as 'subhuman', such rhetoric dehumanises victims and numbs the public to moral consequences. This form of evil language persuades people to accept or participate in inhumane actions by twisting ethical frameworks. When leaders speak of 'collateral damage' instead of civilian deaths or refer to torture as 'enhanced interrogation', they are not just communicating—they are shaping a moral environment in which violence is acceptable. Such language works to diminish critical thinking and desensitise people to the true impact of their actions, turning language into a tool for evil. The danger lies in how easily this manipulative speech can influence collective consciousness, making it seem as if there are no alternatives to violence and destruction. It encourages complicity, allowing individuals to participate in or tolerate atrocities without fully confronting the ethical cost. In this way, language, when used for evil purposes, can have far-reaching and devastating effects on society. Evil speech is a powerful tool used to distort reality and manipulate moral perception. It takes acts of cruelty and destruction and frames them as necessary or even virtuous, stripping away the natural feelings of guilt and shame that would typically arise from such actions. By presenting violence as a duty or higher cause, this kind of language desensitises individuals, allowing them to partake in atrocities without questioning their morality. This language often emphasises purity or honour in the execution of evil, creating a false sense of righteousness. It dehumanises victims and reframes destruction as a protective measure or a moral imperative. Through this manipulation, evil speech not only absolves individuals of personal responsibility but also reshapes their internal moral compass, allowing them to act in ways that would otherwise be unconscionable. The effects of such speech are profound: it numbs empathy, rationalises cruelty, and fosters a collective sense of justification for even the most inhumane actions. By removing the moral weight of decisions, evil speech enables cycles of violence and oppression to continue unchecked, shielded by the belief that the actions taken are necessary and right.

The best use of language

What is the opposite of evil speech? What language avoids systematically distorted communication? What is the best use of language? According to Jürgen Habermas[11], it is what he calls the 'ideal speech situation'. In this concept, communication is free from manipulation, coercion, or distortion, allowing participants to engage in open, honest dialogue where the only force is the strength of the better argument. In an ideal speech situation, several conditions must be met, such as equality of participation, absence of coercion, truthfulness, and rational discourse. All participants must have equal opportunities to speak, question, and express their views. No one should be pressured or manipulated into agreement; participants must be free to express their genuine opinions. Each speaker is assumed to be sincere, aiming to contribute to mutual understanding rather than personal gain or deception. The discussion is oriented toward reaching consensus through logical reasoning and critical reflection, rather than through emotional appeals or rhetorical manipulation. The concept of an 'ideal speech situation' aligns with the idea that the ultimate power of language lies in simple dialogue. When communication is free from manipulation and power dynamics, it becomes communion rather than only

[11] Habermas, J., 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

understanding. Such conversations reflect the deepest purpose of language—creating harmony and connection, where words flow as music and mutuality is the goal. These intimate exchanges are more significant than formal or institutional discourse, which often serves external agendas. Instead, the beauty of simple talk lies in fostering connection and understanding, making it the ultimate form of communication, far more important than the official goals of society or institutions. The ultimate beauty and power of language might be found in the simplicity of meaningful conversations with those close to us.

According to Bulgarian writer Tsvetan Stoyanov[12], the 'great conversations' are more than just passing time; they are akin to art. The performative art of conversation involves rhythm, melody, and a deep connection, requiring harmony between two people. In these moments, words become unnecessary as understanding flows effortlessly, creating a shared experience where thoughts move together. The true magic lies in the feeling of being completely understood, of sharing thoughts and feelings in perfect unison, like a concert between two souls. Such conversations, though fleeting, leave lasting impressions. They might not be recorded like a poem or a sculpture, but their impact continues to shape and guide us long after the words are forgotten. These exchanges give us joy, closeness, and meaning, far beyond what we might initially realise. They have the power to break down barriers, heal wounds, and bring a sense of unity to a world that often feels fragmented. Through good conversations, we find a connection with others that fulfils a fundamental human need for closeness and understanding. In the end, nice conversations reveal that people seek each other not out of necessity, but because we naturally crave this sense of closeness. They remind us of the beauty in our relationships and encourage us to create more of these meaningful interactions. In their simplicity, they may be among the most valuable and fulfilling moments in life. Kurt Vonnegut highlights the importance of recognising and appreciating simple moments of real connection with loved ones, rather than focusing on grand victories. 'So when we were drinking lemonade under an apple tree in the summer, say, and talking lazily about this and that, almost buzzing like honeybees, Uncle Alex would suddenly interrupt the agreeable blather to exclaim, 'If this isn't nice, I don't know what is'.[13] His uncle Alex, a graduate of Harvard, taught him to notice when things are going well—whether it's talking with family or friends, or even sitting together in peaceful silence. These small, everyday moments are where true happiness often lies if you acknowledge their beauty and remind yourself, 'If a simple talk isn’t nice, I don’t know what is'. The simple wisdom holds that the origin of all human achievements can be traced to the genuine connection forged through the 'quiet art' of great conversations.

Down the ladder of babble

The ladder metaphor, used by both Mauthner and Wittgenstein, serves as a powerful representation of how the role of language is understood, though with different nuances. Should people climb the ladder using even more complex language in search of God? Or go down the ladder of useless words in search of their fellow man? Mauthner’s ladder analogy illustrates how language stores historical information. As one climbs a ladder, each new rung that is grasped pushes the lowest rung underground, symbolising how previous stages of language are forgotten but still preserved within it. This process highlights the evolution of language, where

[12] Tsvetan Stoyanov (1988). *Sŭchineniia v dva toma*. Sofia
[13] Vonnegut, K. (2007). A Man Without a Country. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.

old meanings are buried yet remain foundational to new developments. 'I must destroy the language behind me and in front of me and within me from step to step, so I must smash every rung of the ladder by stepping on it'.[14] Mauthner's critique of language demands that each step of the ladder be destroyed once used, so that future climbers must rebuild and destroy it again as they ascend, constantly reshaping language. This also reflects the historical layers that language accumulates and retains, even as it evolves. Wittgenstein, in his 'Tractatus', proposed that the propositions in his book are like rungs on a ladder that must be climbed to achieve understanding, but once this understanding is reached, the ladder (the propositions) should be discarded. This reflects Wittgenstein's view that language can help people see the world correctly, but once that clarity is attained, the limitations of language are exposed, and it must be recognised as inadequate or senseless. In Wittgenstein's words, 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. Mauthner poignantly suggests, 'Men learnt to speak to understand one another. Cultural languages have lost the ability to help men advance beyond the most rudimentary level and attain understanding. The time has come to learn to be silent once again'. This signals a deeper critique: that language, which was once a tool for connection, has now become a barrier to higher comprehension. Considering this, as Mauthner suggests, the time has come 'to learn to be silent once again'. This silence, advocated by both Mauthner and Wittgenstein, reflects the ultimate realisation of the limits of language and the need to transcend it in pursuit of true understanding.

The critique of language, prominent in late 19th and early 20th-century philosophy, revolves around recognising the limits of language in conveying true meaning. Philosophers questioned the ability of words to express complex, existential, or mystical truths, and often pointed to silence as a paradoxical yet essential alternative. Mauthner argued that silence was a sceptical response to the failures of language, representing a retreat from the ideals and superstitions language attempts to convey. Wittgenstein proposed that certain aspects of human experience—such as ethics, aesthetics, and the mystical—are beyond the scope of words. The most important truths reveal themselves through intuition and feeling rather than linguistic explanation. Wittgenstein saw the 'solution of the problem of life' not in language, but in the dissolution of the problem itself, suggesting that silence holds the key to understanding what words cannot capture. Both thinkers underscore the potential harms and dangers of relying too heavily on language. When misused, language can obscure meaning and lead to confusion or false understanding. Silence, in contrast, provides a way to transcend these limits, offering space for deeper reflection and the recognition of truths that lie beyond verbal articulation. In a world where language is often overused or misused, the embrace of silence emerges as a necessary counterbalance, guiding us toward greater clarity and understanding. By going down the ladder, one abandons the quest for domination and transcendence through language, and instead, finds himself back among those who matter most. Descending the tower of abstract language means that all the complex problems are forgotten. Most of the books in the dusty bookcases in university faculties around the world will be forgotten and this is their fate. Going down the tower of babble means leaving the realm of empty words and overcomplicated ideas and returning to the simplicity of genuine human connection. Simple and direct communication—rooted in love, trust, and togetherness—devoid of the entanglements of elaborate language. The only true solution is silence, where you can finally be content with the others, free from the

[14] Mauthner, F. (2014). Beiträge Zu Einer Kritik Der Sprache. Nabu Press.

burdens of language, and grounded in the peace that comes from simply being together. Heaven(same as Hell) is other people.

Tao Te Ching, verse 16

'Forget about knowledge and wisdom,
and people will be a hundred times better off.
Throw away charity and righteousness,
and people will return to brotherly love.
Throw away profit and greed,
and there won't be any thieves.
These three are superficial and aren't enough
to keep us at the centre of the circle,
so we must also: Embrace simplicity.
Put others first. Desire little'.

Preface: THE PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE OF LANGUAGE

'Before men act, they judge. Before they move, they must imagine. The manipulation of behaviour begins with the manipulation of meaning'.
— Hannah Arendt

'The whole culture is moving towards the advertising mode, where persuasive communication is the only communication'.
— Marshall McLuhan

'Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle'.
— Michel Foucault

'The jargon of authenticity... converts every thought into a cliché'.
— Theodor W. Adorno

'Language can be a screen which stands between the thinker and reality'.
— Karl Popper

1. Dark side of language

1.1. First weapon drawn in conflict

Is language a weapon?

What is language? One of the many definitions according to Google is: 'Language is the glue that holds people together. It is the foundation of civilisation. Language is the first weapon drawn in the conflict'. It is a great definition, but it turns out it is a part of a movie script. At the beginning of the movie 'Arrival', physicist Dr. Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner) recites the opening lines from a linguistics text written by Prof. Louise Banks (Amy Adams). 'Language is the first weapon drawn in a conflict', he reads. That line highlights the film's core themes of communication and conflict. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that a culture's formulation, visual representation, and use of language often reflect its identity, including its darker aspects, which may not always be immediately apparent. A constructive force for building larger communities, human language is a tool for preserving values and traditions for millennials. However, language also has a dark side, and it is used for dissent, division, and miscommunication in the same large communities. Like in the myth of Babel, language is responsible for building the tower and for its destruction. It is a dangerous time when one language is used by large groups of people. The nature of human communities defines the language they use, not vice versa. In the beginning was the singing ape, not the word. People precede language. This makes it exceedingly difficult to understand because of the paradox of subjectivity. The language as a subject for the world is one thing, while the language as an object in the world is something else. Understandably, people tend to idealise language and its use for community building and human progress. It is seen as something inherently good that needs admiration rather than control and development. At the same time, there is a systemic bias about language as a destructive force. One thing is true; language can be a weapon. Every war starts with propaganda. The evil use of language as a tool simply shows the negative side of human nature. So, how to avoid this inherent human bias about language? Just as in the movie 'Arrival', only an extraterrestrial or nonhuman view of the matter will shine a light on this dark side. It is said that there are no weapons stronger than words. They hit faster than a bullet and never fail to hit the heart. Even without maleficence language can be harmful to people who use it. It is a dangerous weapon for survival, and exactly like fire can also bring damage. The dark side of language is not only in the form of verbal abuse but also psychological harm. Language plays a crucial role in psychosis and sometimes a mental disorder is a linguistic experience. Apart from malevolent speech, disorganised language is the path to dangerous delusions, utter stupidity, and madness. Often, people can become obsessed with the infinite possibilities of signification of language and use it to reach the darkest places of human consciousness. This dangerous nature of language is usually found in the rich and complex languages of advanced civilisations. It is usually a sign of decadence and collapse of values and meaning.

Primum non nocere

The study of mass miscommunication explores how intentional efforts, historical shifts, and technological advancements contribute to the erosion of linguistic richness, threatening the very essence of human expression by amplifying the destructive effects of mass communication

and human civilisation itself. However, the concept of 'planned obsolescence' presupposes some intention and design in the forces for destruction as a form of renewal. In this case, the non-maleficence principle of 'first, do no harm' (Primum non nocere) cannot be used for the language even when it is investigated as a source of detriment. This principle is useless when investigating human nature. Language is a tool created and used by people, so it reflects their characters. It was regularly used in harmful ways, even in small groups, families, and tribes. But since it became an instrument for uniting tribes in nations, the harmful effects on individuals and small groups increased dramatically. Language strengthens people's sense of connection to their culture, enhancing their mental well-being and fostering greater social cohesion. In big states, the official language is much more than the sum of its dialects. It becomes the culture of the nation. The sense of domination, greatness, and power became the main goal of a national language. This language was created to be ambiguous and universal, so words can be easily obfuscated. Words stand in for concepts that unite people, but they also very easily make groups stand apart from each other. The basic uses of language as a societal tool are for the expression of ideas, transportation of information, and creation of ideological communities. When the language becomes obsolete and loses its shared meaning it is time for renewal. The fastest way for societal change is to change the names of the ideology and institutions. The new language saves a lot of energy and effort to change the real conditions of life and power connections instead of only changing the names. The goal of this language is to build communities of trust and common beliefs, not to deal with problems. Complex languages create purely linguistic and philosophical problems just to divert attention from the status quo. Language as a tool of power has a deeply conservative nature. The process of communication is not merely the transportation of words but a transformation of individuals into virtual collectives. This is how nations are created, usually using some creation myth and historical storyline. Language as a tool for mass communication is also a tool for control and domination of large groups of people. Language is the stuff that empires are made of. Empires throughout history have relied on language to establish control, unify diverse populations, and propagate ideologies. It is through language that laws are written, histories are recorded, and identities are forged. Just as dreams are constructed from fleeting thoughts and symbols, empires are built and sustained through the words and narratives that define them. Language then, becomes the foundation of these grand structures, the medium through which they persist in history and memory. It shapes not only the present but also how future generations will remember them. Language is used to manufacture consent or dissent when needed, order, or disorder in the name of preservation of the status quo. When the tipping point for societal renewal is reached, political language is the first to change. The political economy of complex languages follows cycles of systematically distorted communication or miscommunication. This heavy use of language as a power tool leads to the decay of complex languages, systematic distortion of communication, and latent dysfunctions of social structures. In the downfall of empires, the failure of language mirrors a broader failure of thought and leadership.

A dialect with an army

The phrase 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy' humorously underscores the arbitrary distinction between a dialect and a language, suggesting that the classification is often influenced by political and social power rather than linguistic differences. This witty observation, commonly associated with sociolinguist and Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich, was

popularised after he heard it from an audience member during a lecture series in the 1940s. Weinreich noted how the speaker used this quip to highlight the marginalised status of Yiddish, illustrating how the perception of a language's legitimacy often depends more on political backing than on inherent linguistic qualities. A language is a dialect with an army because the political role of language is to establish dominance and identity within nations and empires. It reflects how state power—through military and political force—often determines whether a dialect becomes recognised as a legitimate 'language' or is marginalised. The distinction is not solely linguistic but is shaped by the social and political forces that grant authority and status to certain languages over others. This idea aligns with how language extinction occurs through economic, political, and cultural forces that systematically erode languages, often favouring those tied to dominant global powers. For example, during the spread of empires or colonial regimes, dominant languages often supplanted local dialects. Languages tied to less powerful communities are sidelined or rendered obsolete to promote those that align with national or imperial agendas. In modern times, language policies are instrumental in shaping national identities, often leading to the deliberate marginalisation of minority languages. Governments may promote a unified national language to strengthen national cohesion, but this often comes at the cost of erasing alternative linguistic forms. When a dialect dies, it signifies the loss of a unique perspective on life. It is not merely a disappearance of words, but the erasure of an entire cultural framework—a specific way of perceiving, interacting with, and interpreting the world. Each dialect carries with it distinct knowledge, values, and experiences, and when it vanishes, so does the rich, nuanced understanding of the small world it represents. This is also the case with minority languages, which are systematically neglected, rendering them irrelevant in the broader socio-political landscape. Languages without an army and a navy are doomed to marginalisation. Furthermore, digital technologies and globalisation accelerate this process. In the digital age, certain languages dominate online platforms, while others struggle to adapt, furthering the rapid decline of less dominant languages. This reflects how linguistic imperialism continues in a new form, where the use of global languages in technology and international trade renders others obsolete. The political role of language is intertwined with the dynamics of power. Those in power shape linguistic evolution, ensuring that certain languages rise to dominance while others fade away, mirroring how political control extends even into the realm of communication and identity. This loss of linguistic diversity mirrors how political and economic forces shape communication, consolidating power through the dominance of certain languages. In turn, this leads to a homogenisation of thought, where the diversity of ideas, expressions, and cultural nuances are oversimplified or flattened. The long-term consequences of this linguistic imperialism often contribute to the fragmentation and decline of empires as they lose touch with the diverse cultures and knowledge systems within their territories.

What are 'we'?

The deterioration of language serves as an early warning of an impending decline of the state. The weakening of intellectual standards and the embrace of superficiality signal the beginning of a larger collapse, as the government loses the ability to communicate effectively, solve problems, and maintain coherence. One of the first signs is the loss of the meaning behind the word 'we', caused by growing diversity, dissent, and inequality. When the collective sense of 'we' — the shared identity and unity that binds a society together — begins to erode social cohesion. Without a shared 'we', the language becomes hollow, and the shared vision that once

sustained starts to fade. This is a critical early sign of impending instability, as the nation loses the glue that once held it together. People need the concept of 'we' to understand and define their identity as 'me'. Our sense of self is shaped by belonging to a linguistic group that thinks like us, shares our worldview, and uses words in similar ways. 'We' provides the context within which 'me' can exist, offering a shared framework of meaning and language. Through this collective identity, people find a deeper understanding of themselves, as our individual experiences are connected to the larger group's understanding of the world. The most important question in any language is, 'What are 'we'? In 1975, Muhammad Ali gave a talk to a group of students who asked him to give them a poem. Ali replied, 'Me, We[15]!' or 'Me? Whee!!' and this couplet competes for the title of the shortest poem ever written in the English language. The first version is about community, and the second is about egotism. One of the shortest poems in English can hold the secret of communication, a freewheeling celebration of the self or altruistic desire for togetherness. These incongruous interpretations show that the ultimate limitation of language is the ego of the person who speaks. Who speaks, why, and to whom? The language was just a tool that initially created a coalition between a few people. After thousands of years, language helped the human population grow to billions. But mass communication changed the use of language forever. The Latin words 'homo sapiens' unite all the people on Earth as 'we'. Navigating the labyrinth of linguistic decay and deliberate manipulation, can 'so called we', the architects of language, descend and desert the orchestrated chaos of the tower of babble and start a new building? Not a tower but a modest home of language. One not of division but of unity, one where sincerity, silence, and mindfulness weave a tapestry of understanding. So, what are 'we'? There is the small 'we'—the people I live among, whose voices, habits, and presence have shaped my "I," making me inseparable from them in language, memory, and identity. Then there is the capital-'We'—those I claim to know through media, institutions, and technology, the imagined masses I align myself with through symbols, narratives, and public rituals. Beyond that lies the ultimate 'We': all of humanity, 'Homo sapiens', an abstraction that exists nowhere except in language, the ultimate medium and technology that forges this metaphor. In creating the greater 'We', Language-as-Society works to dissolve the little 'we' of family and tribe, stripping away my private dialect. As a part of 'We' I stand as an isolated 'free' Individual inside the vast, unreal entity called 'Human Society'. Mass society is the greatest beast on earth.

> *"The Great Beast is the only object of idolatry, the only ersatz of God, the only imitation of something which is infinitely far from me and which is I myself."*
> *— Simone Weil*

Dunbar's number

Dunbar's number, a concept proposed by British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, suggests humans can maintain meaningful relationships with up to 150 people. Language, in this view, originated as a tool for managing increasingly complex social networks, allowing humans to

[15] Gupta, S.D. (2022). Me We by Muhammad Ali. [online] Poem Analysis. Available at: https://poemanalysis.com/muhammad-ali/me-we/.

live in larger groups while maintaining the social bonds necessary for survival and cooperation. This connection between language and social structure underscores the idea that language is not just a means of communication but a vital mechanism for social cohesion and group identity. In these larger groups, where individuals lack personal bonds, it is easier for leaders or institutions to use official literary language to influence, manipulate, and control the collective. Narratives can be shaped to create divisions or foster unity, often by manufacturing common enemies or ideological identities. Without the grounding of personal relationships, individuals in large groups are more likely to align with these constructed identities, making them easier to lead, divide, or control. If the capacity for language and the cognitive load of maintaining about 150 relationships are interconnected as human groups grow, language becomes essential for tracking relationships, maintaining group cohesion, and transmitting cultural knowledge. In extended groups, gossip and storytelling also emerged as ways to build trust, form alliances, and ensure cooperation without direct physical interaction. When personal connections are weakened, wider communities are more susceptible to manipulation and control. In smaller, tightly knit tribes, communication is direct, and trust is built through personal interactions. However, when groups exceed this limit, language becomes the primary tool for cohesion, and abstract concepts like 'us' and 'them' take over. When there is a loss of group and personal identity, one of the easiest and most dangerous ways to renew a sense of collective self-concept is by fabricating an enemy—'us' versus 'them'. This tactic taps into an ancient principle: 'divide and rule'. By manufacturing dissent and fostering division, those in power can create different ideological identities that pit groups against each other, often igniting internal conflict and even 'cold civil wars' within a nation. This strategy capitalises on the human tendency to bond more strongly when faced with a common adversary, artificially strengthening the 'we' by contrasting it against a perceived 'them'. It can fracture society along ideological, ethnic, or social lines, fuelling hostility and undermining unity. While this linguistic strategy of hostile propaganda may temporarily restore a sense of collective belonging, it does so at the cost of deeper division and instability, eroding the very fabric of the nation in the long term. To revitalise the language people must restart speaking local dialects in a small group of people who trust each other. Today to influence only one person looks like a waste of language. Social media gives people the power to speak 'Urbi et Orbi' (To the city and the world), as a papal address. But the purpose of any human language is still to create an emotional bond between at least two people. Me…we! In Vonnegut's words: 'Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia'. Only by speaking and listening together people can retell the narrative of language's decline, transforming it into a tale of renewal, unity, consent, and trust.

1.2. Conspiracy of ambiguity

Conspirare

The idea of a 'conspiracy of speech' revolves around the intentional manipulation or coordination of language to achieve certain goals, often hidden from the public. In such a context, communication between individuals or groups can be designed to obscure true intentions, protect sensitive information, or manipulate public perception without directly lying. Instead, this type of speech relies on indirect, coded, or vague language that allows participants to maintain plausible deniability while still conveying their underlying message. The

'conspiracy of speech' thus reflects a dynamic where miscommunication is not accidental but intentional, crafted to shield the speaker from accountability or to manipulate the narrative. This deliberate distortion of language allows for subtle influence over public discourse while maintaining an appearance of neutrality or openness. In such instances, communication becomes a tool not for transparency but for control, ensuring that only those who are 'in the know' can utterly understand the message. Much like ambiguity, this form of speech can serve a protective function in situations where direct expression is dangerous, socially risky, or politically sensitive. By using language in this way, speakers can maintain plausible deniability, convey messages to in-groups, or influence perception without overtly stating their intentions. In this sense, a conspiracy of speech would be a natural, evolved mechanism within communication, allowing for subtlety and nuance, much like the way ambiguity allows speakers to adapt language to different contexts efficiently. This perspective suggests that both ambiguity and conspiracy of speech arise from the same fundamental drive in language: to enable flexible, efficient, and socially strategic communication. Both can function as tools for navigating the complexities of human relationships, where directness may not always be the most effective or safest approach. In this light, communication can be seen not just as a process of exchanging clear information, but also as a means of managing power, influence, and social dynamics. If we look at 'conspiracy of speech' through the lens of its Latin root 'conspirare', meaning 'to breathe together', it evokes a sense of unity and trust among people. All true communicators must be conspirators if their goal is not only the exchange of information but also relationships with others. This perspective highlights how speech functions more effectively and meaningfully between people who share a close bond or mutual trust. In such cases, communication becomes more fluid, nuanced, and instinctive—like a shared breath, where understanding comes from a deeper connection rather than an explicit explanation. When people 'breathe together' in speech, they do not just exchange words; they engage in a shared experience where subtle cues, tones, and unspoken meanings flow more easily. This close communication enhances understanding because the speakers are attuned to each other's intentions, emotions, and context. Such a 'conspiracy' is not about hiding or deceiving but about cultivating a space where language becomes more intimate and effective. In relationships where trust is strong, communication can transcend the literal meaning of words, allowing for richer, more efficient exchanges. Here, language serves as a bridge that reinforces togetherness, creating a sense of mutual understanding that is harder to achieve in more distant or formal interactions.

Linguistic ambiguity

What is the communicative function of ambiguity in language? MIT[16] cognitive scientists have revisited the longstanding debate on the role of ambiguity in language, offering a fresh perspective that challenges the traditional view of ambiguity as a flaw in communication. Contrary to the belief that language should be optimised for clarity, where each word has a single, distinct meaning, the researchers propose that ambiguity enhances communication. By allowing common, short words to carry multiple meanings, language enables speakers to convey information more economically, relying on the listener’s ability to use contextual clues

[16] Piantadosi, S.T., Tily, H. and Gibson, E. (2012). The communicative function of ambiguity in language. Cognition, 122(3), pp.280–291. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2011.10.004.

to discern the intended meaning. Of course, miscommunication is a possibility and is part of the process. The efficacy of the language game for certain players depends on their abilities, experience, and mindfulness. If ambiguity is inherent to human language, then what is the purpose of systematically distorted communication? This suggests that miscommunication is not a flaw but a feature of language that has evolved to maximise communicative efficiency. For example, in times of social decay and corruption of power, using the vagueness and obscurity of words can be beneficial. On the other hand, doublespeak is often used in politics. The interplay between the sender's need for brevity and the receiver's ability to infer meaning from context creates a system where ambiguity becomes advantageous, streamlining communication by reusing familiar linguistic forms in varied contexts. It underscores the necessity of context in any system dealing with human communication, highlighting the complexity and efficiency of our linguistic capabilities. A perfectly efficient language system, in theory, would eliminate ambiguity, making meaning straightforward to infer without contextual clues. However, the fact that ambiguity is widespread suggests that it might serve an important function. Other than some uses for manipulation, ambiguity enables the reuse of simple, frequent linguistic elements, which are easier to produce and understand. When context provides sufficient information, unambiguous language can become redundant, leading to inefficiency. Thus, an optimal communication system leverages ambiguity, using context to disambiguate meaning without overburdening the listener. These benefits suggest that ambiguity is a natural outcome in any system striving for communicative and cognitive efficiency. That also hints that language tends to make complex and abstract constructions obsolete and to rely on the importance of the concrete situation for understanding. According to the context, doublespeak and irony can be the best communication strategy, even masked as miscommunication.

Doublespeak

In 'The Greeks and Greek Civilisation[17]', Jacob Burckhardt presents a view of ancient Greek culture that contrasts sharply with its idealised image as a cradle of truth and wisdom. Burckhardt argues that Greek society was deeply immersed in deception and sophism. Greeks not only tolerated but often celebrated cunning and fake rhetoric, sometimes placing these above honesty and straightforwardness. As actors, they excelled in the art of presentation and manipulation, both in public and private life. This idea of life as theatre suggests that the Greeks were more concerned with appearance and the persuasive power of language than with truth itself. This cultural tendency is reflected in their politics, and especially democracy, where rhetoric and oratory were prized, and in their literature and philosophy, which often explored themes of duplicity and the ambiguity of human nature. Even the gods in Greek mythology are depicted as deceitful and capricious, reflecting the values of the people who worshipped them. This critical perspective challenges the conventional view of the Greeks as paragons of philosophical virtue, suggesting moral ambiguity. Burckhardt's work invites readers to reconsider the foundations of Western culture, acknowledging the darker aspects of the Greek language as a form of doublespeak. Doublespeak represents a form of linguistic subterfuge,

[17] Burckhardt, J., Murray, O. and Stern, S. (1999). The Greeks and Greek civilization. New York: St. Martin's Press.

where language is deliberately twisted to obscure, distort, or even invert the meaning of words. This manipulation often manifests as euphemisms, but at its core, doublespeak exploits the inherent ambiguity of complex language. Thus, political language turns it into a tool for deceit and abstraction, veiling the truth in layers of palatable falsehoods. The term 'doublespeak' draws inspiration from George Orwell's dystopian vision in Nineteen Eighty-Four, where language is wielded as a weapon of control. Though Orwell did not coin the term, his concepts of 'doublethink' and 'Newspeak' encapsulate the essence of doublespeak—language designed not to clarify, but to confuse, to defend the indefensible, and to render lies indistinguishable from truth. At the same time, doublespeak is used daily in public communication even by people who quote Nineteen Eighty-Four and warn about brainwashing, propaganda, and fake news. This linguistic sleight of hand is most associated with political discourse, where it becomes a mechanism for shaping reality according to ideological agendas. Through doublespeak, the language of power subtly shifts public perception, making the unacceptable appear reasonable and the reprehensible seem justified. It is a form of communication that thrives on ambiguity, where words are stripped of their concrete meanings and repurposed to serve the whims of those in authority. William D. Lutz's book 'Doublespeak' (1989) delves into the manipulation of language used to obscure, mislead, or deceive. Lutz explores how 'doublespeak'—a term for language that deliberately distorts meaning—allows those in power, especially in politics and business, to control narratives and evade responsibility. Various forms of doublespeak as euphemisms, jargon, bureaucratese, and inflated language, show how these techniques are used to manipulate perception and downplay negative outcomes. Doublespeak undermines clear communication, often making it harder for the public to hold institutions accountable. The aim is to manipulate, to obscure, and to lead the audience away from a clear understanding of reality.

Beyond hypocrisy

Edward S. Herman meticulously dissects the insidious mechanisms of doublespeak and doublethink in modern society, offering a compelling analysis in his book 'Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda[18]'. Herman posits that the crux of doublespeak lies not just in the act of lying, but in the systemic ability to lie with impunity. Whether these lies are crafted consciously or stem from self-deception, the hallmark of doublespeak is its selective curation of facts—highlighting those that serve a specific agenda while discarding those that do not align with the desired narrative. Orwellian use of language is pervasive in political communication with layers of propaganda that saturate media and government discourse. With the use of popular buzzwords and political jargon, language is weaponised to obscure truth, manipulate public perception, and sustain power structures. Today words are increasingly used to deceive rather than to inform and the doublespeak permeates our daily lives, where we all act as conspirators. Welcome to the new era where systematic miscommunication, propaganda, and deception are normalised and accepted by society at large. In this new context, the public, along with political leaders, journalists, public relations professionals, and propagandists, actively participates in or tolerates the 'conspiracy of speech' as part of everyday discourse. Of course, this acceptance erodes public trust and allows for manipulation on a broad scale, but it looks like it is an inherent part of mass communication.

[18] Herman, E.S. (1992). Beyond Hypocrisy. Black Rose Books Ltd.

The media's role is to amplify government and corporate propaganda and to filter news through ideological and economic interests. With social media, the audience becomes an active agent in obscuring the objective reflection of truth. This leads to a situation where lies and half-truths become ingrained in the public consciousness, as both the institutions that produce these narratives and the public that consumes them accept miscommunication as the norm. Media discourse is far from challenging power, and often works to reinforce dominant narratives, contributing to a cycle of misinformation that is difficult to break. The normalisation of deception has become a key feature of modern political and social life, making it redundant for people to discern truth from falsehood. Again, the ruling words are the words of the ruling parties. One of the most notable features of the book 'Beyond Hypocrisy' is its 'Doublespeak Dictionary', which provides a lexicon of U.S. government buzzwords and phrases that exemplify how language is manipulated to serve specific political agendas. It highlights the euphemisms, jargon, and misleading terminology that are often employed to soften the impact of harsh realities, justify questionable actions, or create a narrative that aligns with political objectives. The dictionary is decoding euphemisms as, 'Collateral damage'= Civilian casualties resulting from military action, 'Enhanced interrogation'= Torture, and 'Pre-emptive strike'= An unprovoked attack. There are some inversions of meaning, 'Peacekeeping mission'= Military occupation or intervention, 'Freedom fighters'= Rebel groups that align with U.S. interests (while similar groups opposing U.S. interests might be labelled 'terrorists'). In the selective use of language, 'regime' is typically used to describe governments that the U.S. opposes, while friendly governments, even if undemocratic, are described as 'allies' or 'partners'.

The scale of ambiguity

The power of doublespeak lies in its capacity to erode the very foundation of honest communication outside a small group of trusted people. By exploiting the ambiguity of language, it creates a landscape where truth is elusive, and reality is perpetually reshaped by those who control the narrative. Doublespeak serves as a reminder of the power of language to both enlighten and deceive large masses of people. The scale of the audience affects the ambiguity of language. The larger the group, the bigger the lies. The idea that miscommunication and doublespeak may be essential to human civilisation and political structures reflects a broader truth about how societies function on a large scale. In complex political and social systems, language often serves dual purposes: it communicates, but it also masks, manipulates, and obscures. This strategic use of language can help maintain order, manufacture dissent, and promote policies that might be difficult to justify if stated transparently. Historically, societies have relied on doublespeak or similar tactics to navigate power dynamics. Governments, corporations, and institutions often employ doublespeak to obscure uncomfortable truths or sell certain ideas in a more palatable way. This tactic can prevent rebellion, smooth over controversies, and maintain the status quo, even when the public is aware of its deceptive nature. Miscommunication is intrinsically tied to power because it allows those in authority to manipulate language to control public perception, obscure uncomfortable truths, and maintain social order. It enables leaders and institutions to present policies or actions more acceptably, managing dissent or resistance by framing difficult realities in softer, less direct terms. Through doublespeak, power structures can shape narratives to their advantage, reinforcing their control while appearing transparent or benevolent. Even when people recognise that they are being fed lies, they may accept them because large political

structures require a degree of order that direct and brutal truths might disrupt. As societies become larger and more complex, transparency can become destabilising, and doublespeak serves as a buffer between the messy realities of governance and the idealised narratives that maintain public cohesion. In modern times, while the masses may no longer fully believe in the messages propagated through doublespeak, they might tolerate or even expect it. The prevalence of doublespeak highlights how deeply embedded these practices are in governance and media, as it has become an accepted tool for managing public perception. In this sense, doublespeak becomes an unfortunate but necessary part of large-scale societies, allowing governments to function smoothly by avoiding direct confrontation with difficult realities. This echoes the cynical view that doublespeak, though ethically problematic, may serve practical purposes in maintaining social order and preventing upheaval in political systems that need to manage the expectations and frustrations of millions of people. The paradox of miscommunication is that it is both a barrier to true communication and a necessary tool for large, complex societies. In small language communities like clans, families, or tribes, doublespeak is impossible because communication is rooted in trust, directness, and mutual understanding. In these intimate settings, the consequences of deception are immediate and personal, making doublespeak unsustainable. However, as societies grow into large, bureaucratic nations, the need for doublespeak emerges. Governing millions of people with diverse needs, beliefs, and perspectives requires a more strategic use of language. Distorted communication allows political leaders and institutions to navigate complex issues without causing panic or dissent, offering sanitised or palatable versions of difficult truths. It is used to maintain order, justify policies, and shape public perception.

'Doublespeak is a language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is a language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable'. – William Lutz[19]

'Doublespeak is not a victimless crime; it assaults the very foundation of ethical communication'.- George R. Bramer

'Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind'. – George Orwell

'I just want you to know that, when we talk about war, we're really talking about peace'.
— George W. Bush

1.3. We will get fooled again

The folly of language

'The Planned Obsolescence of Language' is a journey through the intricate tapestry of language studies in three volumes. 'The Conspiracy of Speech' tries to unravel the decay of complex languages, 'The Entropy of Communication' to untangle the systematic distortion of

[19] Lutz, W. (1989). Beyond Nineteen Eighty-four.

communication, and 'The Tower of Babble' to elucidate the latent dysfunctions of social structures. The Miscommunication Trilogy follows the long tradition of critique of language, but with a new twist: misunderstanding is as fundamental to language as understanding. That is the doom and gloom merchant's view of language. No room for evolution or improvement in communication. Almost like the praise of the folly of language. The potential for words to be misinterpreted is an inherent part of how communication works. Language does not guarantee precise meaning. The idea is that if misunderstanding is possible even once, it becomes a permanent aspect of how language functions. In the words[20] of Rick Roderic: 'Words can always misrefer. Our meanings could always go astray…And if it is possible to misrefer, if it is possible to misread, if it is possible to misunderstand, then it belongs to that structure I have called language to do those things. Because a possibility once is a necessity forever'. The concept of miscommunication highlights that language is not fixed; meaning can continuously shift, evolve, and be reinterpreted. Just as there can be no final commentary or interpretation of a text, communication remains open-ended, subject to endless flows of information and reinterpretation. The capacity for misunderstanding is not a flaw but a necessary part of the endlessly evolving nature of language itself. The most difficult word to understand is 'we'. What are the limits of 'we'? How many 'we' are there, really? Billions globally, in continents and countries, or just millions squeezed into cities. Why is it so important for so many people to live in big cities? What role does language play in this urban sprawl? What about the population growth? Can it be that language and communication were more important than agriculture and animal breeding? That the promise of a brighter future, not food, is responsible for the population explosion? Language is what binds us, holds us to our word, and connects us in these tight, overcrowded spaces. But cities—they are efficient, energy-wise, sure. But good, common life together? Communication and understanding? That is where it all falls apart. Megacities use the fallen language of the Tower of Babel. We have built these enormous, sprawling cities, but they are maxed out. The idea of living close to others has reached its limit. The rewards of being a good person in a good company are not enough anymore. Cities, with their advancements, work for the efficient, machine-like life of transhumans, but not for fostering genuine human closeness. Language in cities becomes a tool not for connection but for alienation, constantly selling the narrative of this 'better life' that never quite materialises. Language gives meaning to the struggle for power and control. It is an abstract societal construct that can operate in a radical absence of humans. It is how we sell wars, market pointless jobs, and mask the reality of a disconnected, confused existence. The city might make sense in terms of energy efficiency, but for honest human communication, for the goodness we seek in life, it is a dead end. At the core, a big society is a fragile structure of words, laws, and promises. Break those words, and the whole thing disintegrates. If the storytelling stops, the tower collapses. Like in the movie 'The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus' (2009), a mysterious traveller climbs to a remote monastery nestled high in the mountains. He finds monks seated in quiet rhythm, their voices weaving an invisible thread. When asked what they do, one calmly replies, "We tell the Eternal Story." This story, they say, sustains the entire universe—without it, nothing exists. Stopping the story would mean the end of all things. He laughs—how could something so vital rest on mere words? Yet the monks are solemn. This is their ordained task, their sacred

[20] 307 derrida and the ends of man (1993) - Rick Roderick (2024) Rick Roderick -. Available at: https://rickroderick.org/307-derrida-and-the-ends-of-man-1993/ (Accessed: 14 August 2024).

duty. To them, the universe depends not on matter or force, but on narrative. He challenges them. The words falter. Silence settles. The world does not end, but something subtle shifts—an absence, a thinning. The monks stare quietly. “The story stopped,” one says. The traveller turns, half-smiling. “Then perhaps,” he replies, “my work here is done.” Only then do they understand: this was no ordinary sceptic, but the one who dissolves meaning—not with fire, but with disbelief. The story stops, and without it, reality begins to unravel in silence.

Ultima Ratio Regum

The cannons of King Louis XIV of France were historically inscribed with the motto 'Ultima ratio regum', which translates from Latin as 'the last argument of kings'. The phrase symbolises the idea that when all other means of persuasion and diplomacy fail, war becomes the final tool or 'last argument' of rulers. The word 'argument' here suggests both the rhetorical sense of debate and logic, as well as a final physical force, in the form of cannons or warfare. In this context, words and logic become like weapons themselves, tools used to assert dominance or force a conclusion when all other means of negotiation fail. Just as kings use war as their last 'argument' when diplomacy and persuasion are exhausted, words can similarly be deployed like guns, aiming to overpower the opposition. The phrase emphasises that in both warfare and rhetoric, the goal is often not mutual understanding, but dominance. 'Language is the first weapon drawn in the conflict'. Language, like cannons, can be both persuasive and destructive, depending on how it is wielded. In political contexts, where rhetoric is a primary tool for rulers, the 'argument' can be sharpened like a weapon—just as in times of war, force becomes the ultimate resolution. When words lose their power, violence steps in as the 'logical' extension of that failed rhetoric, reinforcing the truth behind power dynamics. Language shapes consent and dissent, builds and destroys cities, and creates love and hate on a mass scale. It operates within specific groups, at specific times and territories. This discourse is a closed system—inevitably prone to entropy and chaos. To avoid collapse, you either open the system or increase the scale and complexity. But, planned obsolescence, in language and society, is unavoidable. To protect yourself, you simplify your language, reducing nuance. There is a natural limit to complex language—a protective mechanism if you will. Not only does language evolve, but so does the instinct for its collapse. Meaning degrades, and simplification sets in, as those in power often justify mass harm in the name of stability. History shows that intelligent, rational rulers can commit atrocities more efficiently. Verbal abuse is often more insidious than physical violence. Advanced forms of cruelty, like torture, emerge from highly developed civilisations with complex languages. The awful pleasure in harming others is fuelled by myths, stories, and explanations. Evil itself often begins as a linguistic creation, designed to divide and incite conflict. There are linguistic constructions meant to justify violence. When language leads to chaos and collapse the end of equilibrium is reached. Semantic entropy is the point where rational systems reach their maximum lack of meaning. Think of the myth of the Tower of Babel—when humans united and aimed to reach the power of the gods, they were thrown back into division and tribalism. Language fragmented, and they returned to arguing and conflict. It is as if the gods foresaw the destructive potential of language in expanding societies. The planned obsolescence of language is built into the culture. Every time people aim to reach higher, communicate with gods, or understand the secrets of nature, their complex language collapses into babble—hence, the 'Tower of Babble'. The word 'collapse' means 'fall together', from Latin collapsus, of com 'with, together' (see com-) + lapsus 'a slipping and falling, a

landslide; falling into error', from 'labi'- 'to glide, slip, slide, sink, fall; decline, go to ruin', which is of unknown etymology. The collapse of a complex linguistic structure sometimes is just 'falling into error together'. In the end, every grand linguistic edifice meets its 'lapsus'-a collective slip that turns striving for the sublime into the collapse of meaning itself.

Fooled again?

The lyrics of the song 'Won't Get Fooled Again' by The Who reflect a deep cynicism about any possible political change, expressing the idea that despite revolutionary upheaval, society often ends up under similar leadership. The famous line, 'Meet the new boss, same as the old boss', suggests that after revolutions or significant political shifts, little changes in terms of power structures and the nature of leadership. The song critiques political language and revolutionary slogans, implying that they are often tools of manipulation. People are 'hypnotised' by the allure of change, but in the end, the system remains fundamentally the same. This reflects a broader disillusionment with the promises of political movements that result in a return to familiar patterns of control and governance. The lines in the song speak to a cycle where society knows it is being fooled yet continues to go through the motions. The political language, filled with miscommunication and deception, becomes an integral part of maintaining societal order, even if that order is built on lies. The song implies that we need a new leader or system, but it acknowledges the grim reality that any new boss may not be much different from the old one. The 'hypnotised' represent people who have been manipulated or brainwashed, and because they are so deeply convinced, they cannot see the deception themselves. They are not consciously lying because they fully believe in the truth they have been fed, highlighting the idea that many people will continue to follow the same cycles of power without questioning them. But the lyrical hero who sings this song recognises the futility of the changes around him. While he is prepared to survive and protect his family, he also accepts that the 'new' revolution may be no different from the previous system. The repeated refrain 'We don't get fooled again' is ironic — even though people hope they will not be fooled, history guarantees that they will be fooled again, and happily. In the end is 'the same as the old boss', showing that revolutions often replace one flawed system with another that is fundamentally similar. This critique aligns with the concept that political language often relies on doublespeak or manipulation, where change is more superficial than substantive. Despite the initial hope for real change, people end up in similar positions of disillusionment, repeating the same mistakes. For we know that we will get fooled again. The hypnotised are lied to again. But the hypnotists—the leaders, influencers, or manipulators— are themselves deceived, fooled by the very lies they weave. Even while they seem to command the hypnotised masses, the hypnotists are themselves bound by the machinery of official language, which shapes their thoughts before they can shape others'. What they imagine as control is merely their role in a perpetual motion of deception, sustained by the system's own momentum. In such a cycle, language answers to no individual will, and can only end by collapsing under the weight of its own fictions. This could point to a cycle where everyone, from top to bottom, is trapped in layers of illusion, unable to break free from the system of lies. Perpetuum mobile of language—a self-sustaining cycle in which everyone, from highest to lowest, remains ensnared in layered illusions, powerless to escape the machinery of deceit.

Language cannot be jammed

In the conspiracy of political language dissent becomes a commodity and, in a consumer,-driven world, even anti-establishment statements can become part of the media marketplace. As the book ' The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't be Jammed [21]' suggests that rebellion or revolutionary ideals are packaged and sold to the masses, often by the very system they seek to resist. This could manifest through language that presents a facade of rebellion but serves commercial interests. It is a cyclical deception where rebellion becomes another cog in the machine, sold to the people as a solution but serving the same forces of power. The manipulation might be systemic, embedded in ideologies, power structures, or cultural norms that condition the rulers, the ruled, and the rebels to accept and propagate the same old patterns, even when they think they are creating something new or different. This concept highlights the futility of political language for societal changes that do not address the deeper, underlying issues. Why the political language cannot be jammed? All attempts to disrupt or challenge political discourse through symbolic acts or countercultural rebellion often fail within an existing framework. Any form of alternative expression is quickly absorbed by the capitalist system. Whether it is politics, journalism, or slogans, these forms of dissent are turned into commodities and sold back to the public. Instead of challenging the system, they become part of it, consuming their own power. The words of rebellion are commodified and turned into products. This weakens their original political message, making them superficial and ineffective as tools for change. The system encourages individualistic expressions of dissent because it can profit from them, so these expressions do not disrupt the underlying power structures. Focusing on lifestyle rebellion—such as alternative fashion or consumer choices—gives the illusion of political engagement but distracts from the need for organised, collective action. Political change requires systemic efforts, not just symbolic gestures, or alternative rhetoric. When the words of rebellion are commodified, political language loses its oppositional power. Once symbols of resistance become part of mainstream culture, they no longer serve as challenges to the system. They may still appear rebellious, but their impact is superficial, failing to address the deeper structures of power. Political language cannot be jammed because symbolic rebellion is easily co-opted by the very system it seeks to challenge, turning genuine dissent into marketable products and distractions that do not lead to real change. The rebel, despite his defiance and resistance, seems to accept that he will be fooled again. He is aware that revolutions often lead to superficial change, where new leaders simply replace old ones, and the system itself remains intact. The rebel is not a true leader of change but merely a 'singer of change', someone who can express the desire for transformation but lacks the power or influence to bring about systemic change. His role is purely linguistic—he can inspire, provoke thought, or raise awareness, but he remains trapped in the cycle he critiques. His song is moving, sincere, and inspiring, yet, like the song, it is just words—aspirational but ineffective in causing tangible, lasting change. Language cannot be jammed; the only thing you can jam is yourself.

Hypnotised never lie

The conspiracy of speech is the nature of our political language. In this scenario, the hypnotised are always telling the truth, the hypnotists are not malicious masterminds; rather, they are part of the same flawed, cyclical system. They may believe in their authority or righteousness, but they are deceived just like everyone else. But there is a third group, between

[21] Heath, J. and Potter, A. (2004). The Rebel Sell.

the hypnotist and the hypnotised. They are the woken, the dissenters, the rock stars who are brave enough to tell the truth. But the lyrical hero in the song 'Won't Get Fooled Again' is very aware that he is part of the conspiracy. Even those who think they are not 'hypnotised' like others—whether it is through politics, media, or authority—are themselves mesmerised and co-opted by the forces they oppose. The singer knows that 'we will be fooled again', recognising the cycle of false promises and superficial change. Unlike idealistic speakers, he understands that new systems often mirror the old ones. This admission reflects a realistic, even cynical, view of revolutions, where despite the hope for transformation, the underlying power structures remain the same. By acknowledging this, the singer brings a sense of honesty, accepting that true change is rare, and the cycle of deception continues. In a way, this is a more honest stance. The singer is not pretending that he or anyone else will break the cycle—he sees the pattern repeating and admits it openly. This gives his position a kind of authenticity, even if it is tinged with resignation. While there is no grand solution offered, there is at least clarity and self-awareness in his understanding of the flawed nature of human language and power structures. The singer's words are a dance of nonsense, tautologies, and self-consuming concepts—beautiful in form yet purposeless. His language exists purely for its own sake, revealing the futility of change while undoing itself. In this poetic self-destruction, his expression becomes art, where meaning dissolves poetically in the beauty of contradiction. A poetic 'song for change' is the fullest possible language. Poetry is the only way to cover up the dark side of language. The fullest expression of what words can accomplish.

'We'll be fighting in the streets
With our children at our feet
And the morals that they worship will be gone
And the men who spurred us on
Sit in judgment of all wrong
They decide and the shotgun sings the song

I'll tip my hat to the new Constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution
Smile and grin at the change all around
Pick up my guitar and play
Just like yesterday
Then I'll get on my knees and pray
We don't get fooled again
Don't get fooled again, no, no
Yeah
Meet the new boss
Same as the old boss'
The Who, Won't Get Fooled Again

2. Necessity of obsolescence

2.1. Planned obsolescence of language

Planned obsolescence

On a distant planet, far, far away, the protagonist of Robert Sheckley's 'A Ticket to Tranai[22]' encounters a society that appears perfect but conceals its flaws beneath a veneer of utopia. One of the story's most striking elements is the invention of 'planned obsolescence' and 'designed discomfort', which the protagonist introduces to revive the economy and culture. Sheckley's satire mirrors real-world practices where companies design products to fail or become obsolete, ensuring a cycle of constant replacement and upgrading. The story goes further, suggesting that planned obsolescence might serve as a social stabiliser. By creating ongoing demand for new products and services, it keeps people engaged in work and consumption, fostering a sense of purpose and progress. In a society where labour defines personal and societal value, this endless cycle of production and consumption prevents stagnation and maintains social order. Sheckley's narrative questions the rationality and ethics of such systems, suggesting that the logic of society is upheld by artificial constructs. These ideological constructs may provide a comforting illusion of meaning and purpose, even as they perpetuate a cycle of superficial progress. In this view, planned obsolescence becomes more than just an economic strategy—it is a necessary linguistic structure that keeps the machinery of society running, ensuring that individuals feel their contributions are meaningful, even without true material value. The concept of planned obsolescence finds its origins in the early 20th century, with one of the earliest references being Bernard London's 1932 pamphlet, 'Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence'. London proposed a radical idea where the government would legally mandate the obsolescence of personal-use items to stimulate perpetual purchasing and economic activity. However, it was in 1954 that the term truly gained traction, thanks to American industrial designer Brooks Stevens. Preparing for an advertising conference in Minneapolis, Stevens casually chose 'planned obsolescence' as the title of his talk, a decision that would etch the phrase into the lexicon of modern consumerism. For Stevens, planned obsolescence meant 'instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than necessary'.[23] As the phrase gained popularity, it became a point of contention. By the late 1950s, planned obsolescence had become synonymous with products deliberately designed to break down or go out of style quickly, driving continuous consumption. The concept was so ingrained in the public consciousness that even Volkswagen, in its iconic 1959 advertising campaign, took a stand against it. The ads, created by Doyle Dane Bernbach, proudly declared, 'We do not believe in planned obsolescence', positioning Volkswagen as a bastion of durability in a market increasingly dominated by disposability. One memorable ad simply stated, 'No point in showing the 1962 Volkswagen, it still looks the same', highlighting the brand's resistance to unnecessary changes. The critique of planned obsolescence deepened with the publication of Vance Packard's 'The Waste Makers' in 1960. Packard's work exposed the systematic efforts by businesses to create wasteful, debt-laden, and perpetually dissatisfied consumers. He dissected planned obsolescence into two categories: 'obsolescence of desirability' and 'obsolescence of function'. The former, also known as 'psychological

[22] Sheckley, R. (2014). Citizen in Space. Open Road Media.
[23] Adamson, G. and Stevens, B. (2003). Industrial Strength Design. MIT Press.

obsolescence', referred to the strategy of making a product feel outdated in the mind of the consumer, even when it was still perfectly functional. Industrial designer George Nelson encapsulated this idea succinctly when he noted, 'Design ... is an attempt to make a contribution through change. When no contribution is made or can be made, the only process available for giving the illusion of change is 'styling''.[24]

Language as a commodity?

Can language itself become a commodity? Are words just products we consume to express our identity and social status? Just as we rely on material goods, our economy will demand that we treat language—words, phrases, and slogans—as items that define our place in society. The ritual of communication becomes a consumptive act, where our spiritual and ego satisfaction is found in the phrases we adopt and the slogans we embrace. The more pressure we feel to conform to social norms, the more we express our individuality through carefully chosen words and catchphrases. These linguistic items, like material goods, must be used up, replaced, and discarded with increasing urgency. Our identities are shaped by the words we speak, the hashtags we use, and the slogans we champion, just as our status is defined by the things we buy and display. To sustain this system, language must be consumed rapidly and at soaring prices. New slogans, trends, and phrases constantly emerge, and the old ones are discarded, much like fashion or technology. Just as we seek ever-more complex and costly goods, we hunger for more elaborate and exclusive language—words that give us social capital and prestige. In this cycle, language is both the product and the marker of social worth, with ever-evolving expressions replacing the last in an endless pursuit of relevance and individuality. The relentless production of unfamiliar words, phrases, and ideas—often designed to capture attention fleetingly—creates a linguistic landscape cluttered with discarded concepts and forgotten meanings. The concept of 'planned obsolescence of language' mirrors the strategy where products are deliberately designed with a limited lifespan to encourage frequent replacement. In the linguistic context, this idea refers to the intentional or systematic erosion, manipulation, or transformation of language, making certain words, phrases, or meanings obsolete over time. It is a language that cancels itself over time using self-consuming concepts. What is left of the once-powerful ideas are just tautologies and nonsense. Just as physical products are made to wear out or become unfashionable to drive continuous consumption, language can be shaped to favour constant renewal and proliferation at the expense of clarity and durability. This guarantees endless knowledge production and linguistic consumerism. This phenomenon reflects a preference for quantity over quality, as those who shape language—writers, media, publishers, politicians, educational institutions, etc.—may prioritise the relentless production of content over the refinement of meaningful communication. But does planned obsolescence extend beyond a human profit-driven strategy to something inherent in natural laws of entropy and dissipation? When applied to language, this theory suggests that language evolves and decays much like any physical system. Entropy, the principle that systems move toward disorder, could explain how languages become increasingly complex or fragmented over time, necessitating renewal or replacement. By continuously introducing new linguistic forms, jargon, or frameworks, the complexity of communication increases, ensuring that only those with access to certain information can fully participate. This dynamic not only

[24] Packard, V. (2011). The waste makers. Brooklyn, Ny: Ig Pub.

drives profit by creating a market for language products but also reinforces authority by making certain forms of communication inaccessible to the general population. As a result, language shifts from a tool for effective communication to a commodity that must be constantly consumed, upgraded, and replaced. Those who control the production and dissemination of language—such as government institutions, media, and corporations—benefit by remaining gatekeepers of communication, while society is left with a constantly shifting linguistic landscape that prioritises consumption over clarity. The result is a linguistic environment where the rapid turnover of empty ideas and fake expressions is encouraged, often leading to a degradation of clear and simple language. In contrast, one might consider the value of investing in 'handcrafted linguistic luxury'—a focus on bespoke, custom-made private language that prioritises quality and depth over mass production. This approach values the time and effort required to craft language with care, much like the difference between mass-produced goods and artisanal creations. Instead of rushing to produce new texts every day, in language, true quality demands patience and deliberate craftsmanship, rather than the haste of constant output.

Economic theory of obsolescence

Jeremy Bulow's 1985 paper, titled 'An Economic Theory of Planned Obsolescence',[25] examines how firms deliberately design products with a limited useful lifespan to increase future sales. The theory suggests that manufacturers intentionally create goods that will become non-functional after a certain period, compelling consumers to buy upgrades. Bulow presents a framework for understanding how planned obsolescence can influence economic outcomes, particularly in monopolistic or highly competitive industries. The notion of planned obsolescence in language, therefore, raises important questions about the balance between linguistic quantity and quality. Just as the technology cycle is constrained by design time, the creation of meaningful language is limited by the time it takes to develop and refine ideas. By focusing on durability, clarity, and the repairability of language—much like advocating for sustainable practices in product design—people can push back against the forces that drive linguistic obsolescence and work towards a more thoughtful, sustainable approach to communication. This shift would favour long-term understanding and connection over the fleeting satisfaction of novelty, much like choosing a handcrafted item over a disposable one. The planned obsolescence of language refers to the deliberate erosion or manipulation of language, where certain words, phrases, or meanings are systematically phased out or redefined to suit new cultural trends, political agendas, or commercial interests. Much like with technology, this process creates a kind of linguistic waste—words and ideas that are discarded and forgotten as quickly as they are created, leading to a dilution of cultural depth and historical continuity. The socio-cultural impact of this linguistic obsolescence and waste is profound. Language is a living archive of human experience, a repository of cultural knowledge and identity. When language is manipulated and eroded, entire communities can lose touch with their heritage and history. The constant churn of linguistic trends fosters a culture of disposability, where the emphasis is on novelty and surface-level communication rather than on preserving the richness and diversity of our linguistic heritage. This not only weakens the

[25] Bulow, J. (1985). An economic theory of planned obsolescence. Chicago: Center For The Study Of The Economy And The State, University Of Chicago.

ties that bind communities together but also diminishes our collective ability to engage in meaningful discourse. From the perspective of a semantic environment, the planned obsolescence of language parallels the wasteful practices seen in consumer culture. The relentless production of new language forms, whether in media, advertising, or academia, often serves to generate more consumption—of products, ideas, and content—while leaving behind a trail of linguistic debris. This contributes to a broader culture of overconsumption, where resources are expended on the creation of transient, disposable content rather than on sustaining and enriching the cultural ecosystem. To mitigate the socio-cultural and semantic impacts of linguistic obsolescence, people must adopt a more sustainable approach to language. This means valuing linguistic durability and promoting the preservation and revitalisation of endangered languages and dialects. It also involves fostering spaces for thoughtful, reflective communication that resists the pressure for constant novelty and instead honours the depth and history embedded in our words. In the same way that a circular economy seeks to extend the life of physical products through reuse, repair, and recycling, a sustainable approach to language would prioritise the conservation of linguistic resources, ensuring that cultural and intellectual heritage is not lost in the relentless drive for the new. By doing so, people can create a more resilient and culturally rich society, one that values the enduring power of words and ideas over the fleeting allure of linguistic trends. Jeremy Bulow's theory can be reimagined as 'A Linguistic Theory of Planned Obsolescence', where language is intentionally manipulated and obscured for profit and increased linguistic output rather than clarity and quality.

Linguistic theory of planned obsolescence

Abstract:

This theory examines how language creators intentionally foster linguistic obsolescence to drive continuous consumption of new language products. Instead of prioritising clarity, simplicity, and quality in communication, these stakeholders perpetuate a cycle of complexity, jargon, and neologisms. This cycle is designed to maintain and increase demand for new linguistic outputs, leading to a proliferation of content that is often opaque and convoluted, rather than easily understood.

Introduction:

Language is a powerful tool for communication but can be easily manipulated to serve economic and institutional interests rather than the public good. This theory explores how the deliberate complication and constant evolution of language serve as a strategy to increase production and maintain control over the flow of information. By creating linguistic products that quickly become obsolete or difficult to understand, these stakeholders ensure a steady demand for new materials, thereby sustaining their own relevance and economic gain.

Mechanisms of Linguistic Obsolescence:

1. Intentional Complexity: Creators of language products, such as academics, journalists, and politicians, often introduce complex jargon, acronyms, and specialised terminology. This intentional complexity makes older materials quickly seem outdated or irrelevant, compelling consumers to seek out the latest works to stay 'up to date'. The more complex and esoteric the language becomes, the greater the demand for new interpretations, explanations, and updates.

2. Rapid Innovation in Language: The relentless introduction of novel words, phrases, and linguistic trends creates a sense of urgency and novelty. Like how innovative technology models are released frequently to replace older ones, language is continuously updated with

new terminologies that make previous expressions seem old-fashioned or inadequate. This strategy ensures that language consumers must constantly purchase new materials, attend new seminars, and follow new discourses to remain linguistically competent.

3. Institutional Endorsement of Change: Educational institutions and publishers play a crucial role in endorsing and propagating linguistic obsolescence. By frequently revising curricula, updating textbooks, and promoting new academic works, they reinforce the idea that language is a dynamic, ever-changing entity. This creates a perpetual market for new editions of textbooks, updated courses, and revised reference materials, ensuring continuous revenue for those involved in the production and distribution of language.

4. Media Amplification: The media serves as a powerful amplifier of linguistic trends and innovations. By adopting and popularising new language forms—whether through news, entertainment, or social media—media outlets contribute to the perception that language must constantly evolve. This not only drives demand for the latest content but also creates a culture where older forms of expression are quickly discarded or ridiculed, furthering the cycle of planned obsolescence.

4. Political and Corporate Exploitation: Politicians and corporate entities exploit language obsolescence to shape public discourse and maintain control over narratives. By introducing new buzzwords, policy terms, and marketing language, they can manipulate public perception and discourse. This manipulation ensures that the language of previous administrations or product cycles is quickly forgotten and replaced by new terminology that requires fresh understanding and interpretation, thus driving demand for new political or corporate messaging.

Impacts of Linguistic Obsolescence:

The constant production of new language forms can lead to a dilution of meaning and a decline in the quality of communication. As language becomes more complex and fragmented, the average person's ability to communicate clearly and effectively diminishes. The emphasis on novelty over clarity results in a populace that is more confused and less able to engage in meaningful discourse.

Just as planned obsolescence in products leads to economic exploitation, so too does linguistic obsolescence. Consumers of language—whether students, professionals, or the public—are compelled to spend money on new books, courses, and materials to keep pace with the latest linguistic trends.

As language becomes more specialised and compartmentalised, different segments of society may begin to speak in increasingly divergent ways, leading to social and cultural fragmentation. The constant evolution of language can create barriers to communication between different generations, social classes, and professional groups, exacerbating divisions within society.

Conclusion:

The planned obsolescence of language is a deliberate strategy employed by various stakeholders to maintain economic and institutional power. By fostering a cycle of constant linguistic innovation and complexity, these stakeholders ensure a continuous demand for new language products, at the expense of clarity and quality in communication. This strategy not only drives profit but also reinforces the authority of those who control the production and dissemination of language. As a result, society is left with a language that is less about effective communication and more about sustaining a perpetual cycle of consumption and control.

The illusion of commodification

The reimagined 'Linguistic Theory of Planned Obsolescence' highlights how language, much like consumer products, can be subject to planned obsolescence, driven by the interests of those who benefit from continuous linguistic innovation and complexity. This 'lingo-economic' theory could be extended to include how language in politics, marketing, and academia often evolves not to improve understanding, but to confuse, control, or exclude. Maybe, just as planned obsolescence in products generates profit and dependency, the obsolescence of language ensures that power structures remain intact, as those who cannot keep up with the latest linguistic trends are left out of critical discourse. Just as systems governed by entropy eventually reach a state of collapse and transformation, language systems—if burdened by complexity, overuse, and manipulation—might similarly break down. This breakdown could then lead to a new equilibrium in language, through the emergence of simpler or more universal forms of communication. Language is a living system and has mechanisms to protect itself and society. When it becomes overly corrupted by doublespeak, there is often a natural push for renewal—a reset. This renewal can be seen as part of a 'planned obsolescence of language' where outdated and manipulative forms of communication are eventually discarded, allowing for the emergence of clearer, more direct language. This cyclical renewal may act as a safeguard, protecting humans from the overreach of power and the environmental or social consequences of large, disconnected societies. In this way, language contains a kind of 'kill switch' that activates when its misuse threatens to destabilise society or the environment. Humans, not naturally adapted to live in such vast, power-driven societies, may rely on these linguistic shifts to restore balance, ensuring that communication remains a force for connection and understanding, rather than manipulation and control. What is planned obsolescence? It is not just planning to fail, but rather designing systems with an expiration date, ensuring their eventual breakdown. It is a design of a failure. Everything built by man has a built-in kill switch. Language is like a house of cards.

The widespread portrayal of language as a commodity reflects a broader shift in global political-economic thinking, where all human activity is reframed in terms of exchange, value, and market logic. Yet calling language a 'commodity' is more metaphor than material truth. Language, unlike manufactured goods, is not produced through labour in the capitalist sense—it does not contain congealed labour nor emerge from formalised production processes. It only 'appears' commodified due to the fetishism intrinsic to capitalism, where symbols of value displace their material roots. The notion of a 'linguistic market', highlights how language varieties are socially ranked, assigned prestige, or marketed as assets. But this ranking functions more as ideology than as economic substance. Scholars drawing from Marxist political economy argue that commodities have value only through the labour invested in their production. Language, on the other hand, precedes markets and labour relations. It is a social and symbolic system, shaped over generations, not manufactured for exchange. Much of the literature on the commodification of language treats it as a discursive process—language is valued based on desire, utility, or symbolic capital. This view aligns implicitly with neoliberal ideals that reduce all human capacities to marketable skills, dissolving the distinction between being and appearing. In this framing, languages and speakers are repackaged as bundles of competencies, ready to be sold. However, if the production of real commodities is tied to material labour, then language—without that production process—remains outside this definition. 'Intellectual labour' primarily involves mental effort, such as thinking, analysing, and

problem-solving, so it is a part of language. This effort to produce words in a form of copywriting or intellectually mundane jobs cannot be separated from their authors completely. The products of language will always bear the biases of their creators and re-creators. Every word can be ideologically charged, and this is an obstacle for commodification. The illusion of language as a commodity results from removing labour from the concept of value and mistaking visibility for substance. Words are empty containers that always refer to something else, while commodities have an intrinsic value and materiality. A 'commodity'(n.) means 'benefit, profit, welfare;' also 'a convenient or useful product', from Latin (nominative) commoditas 'fitness, adaptation, convenience, advantage'. Words can be convenient and useful, but are just means towards benefit, profit, and welfare. A clearer understanding of obsolescence in language requires reconnecting linguistic analysis to the material realities of life—not merely discourse.

2.2. Critique of communication

Superficiality of information

In 'Critique of Information'[26], Scott Lash offers a penetrating analysis of the information age, highlighting the commodification and overwhelming proliferation of data that shape our contemporary world. Extending Lash's critique to the realm of language reveals a similar phenomenon where linguistic overload reflects information overload. Words, phrases, and linguistic trends are deliberately engineered to become obsolete, driving a relentless cycle of consumption that mirrors the excesses of the information economy. Lash contends that the information age has inundated us with a torrent of data, much of it devoid of meaning or substance. This critique is equally applicable to language, where the unceasing production of books, articles, speeches, and media content has created a linguistic landscape characterised by overwhelming excess. Just as the flood of information can desensitise and overwhelm, the constant churn of language erodes our ability to communicate effectively and meaningfully. The emphasis on quantity over quality—where creators of language prioritise sheer volume over clarity and depth—has resulted in a society awash in words yet often lacking true understanding or insight. Much like Lash's critique of the superficiality of modern information, we must scrutinise the superficiality of language that is designed to quickly become obsolete. This obsolescence drives a never-ending cycle of linguistic consumption, where words and ideas are discarded as soon as the next trend emerges. What are the economics of linguistic obsolescence? Exploration of the information economy can be likened to the economics of language production, where language itself is treated as a disposable commodity. The planned obsolescence of language is no accident; it is a calculated strategy to keep consumers perpetually engaged with the latest linguistic trends, ensuring a steady flow of revenue for those who produce and distribute language. This approach has profound consequences. As language is constantly updated and repackaged, older forms of expression are cast aside, often before they have had the opportunity to fully mature or be thoroughly understood. This stifles meaningful discourse and creates a culture that sacrifices depth and longevity in communication for the sake of novelty and profit. What are the social costs of linguistic saturation? When society is bombarded with an excess of language—much of it shallow or ephemeral—it

[26] Lash, S. (2002). Critique of Information. SAGE.

becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to discern what is profoundly important or meaningful. The planned obsolescence of language exacerbates this problem, encouraging a focus on transient trends and terminologies rather than on enduring principles of clear and honest communication. This linguistic saturation carries significant social costs. It breeds confusion and disorientation, as the ever-changing influx of new language makes it difficult to keep up with or fully grasp contemporary discourse. It undermines social cohesion, as diverse groups within society adopt divergent linguistic trends, leading to fragmentation and a lack of shared understanding. Moreover, it diminishes the power of language to inspire and mobilise, as people grow numb to the endless stream of words that inundate them daily. As a call for linguistic reflection, Scott Lash's 'Critique of Information' provides a compelling framework for understanding the challenges of the information age. When applied to language, his insights expose the dangers of a culture that prioritises rapid linguistic production and consumption over the quality of communication. The planned obsolescence of language is symptomatic of a deeper issue—a society that values profit and novelty over clarity and meaning. Reflecting on Lash's work reminds us of the need to reclaim language from the forces that seek to commodify and dilute it. But what if these forces are stronger than people? What if the nature of knowledge is ephemeral and information is doomed to die?

Information as rubbish

In Erik Sherman's 'Everything Dies, Including Information'[27], the transience of knowledge and the inevitable decay of information in the digital age are laid bare. The article serves as a poignant reminder that, much like physical objects and civilisations, knowledge too has a finite lifespan. Despite our advances in digitisation, which offer a semblance of permanence, the forces of entropy and obsolescence remain inexorable. This narrative of decay is deeply intertwined with the fragility of language, echoing the impermanence of information. Sherman paints a bleak picture of our current technological landscape, where digital storage systems, though remarkably dense, are alarmingly fragile. Information stored today may become unreadable within a few years, requiring constant migration to new formats to stave off oblivion. This mirrors the obsolescence of language, where the rapid turnover of linguistic trends and terminologies leaves older forms of expression to fade into obscurity, often before they have fully matured or been comprehensively understood. Archivists now face the Herculean task of managing an unprecedented flood of information, much of which is recorded indiscriminately. This deluge complicates the preservation of knowledge, as it becomes increasingly difficult to discern what should be saved and how. Similarly, in the linguistic realm, the overwhelming production of content—often driven by the need for novelty and profit—results in a saturation that dilutes meaningful communication. As Sherman notes, the entropy of information is ever-present, waiting in the wings to erase what has not been carefully preserved. The planned obsolescence of language carries profound socio-cultural implications. In a world where linguistic trends are constantly evolving, older forms of expression are rendered obsolete, often before they have had the chance to contribute meaningfully to the cultural discourse. This not only stifles the depth and richness of communication but also fragments society, as distinct groups adopt divergent linguistic trends, leading to a loss of shared

[27] Sherman, E. (2022) Everything dies, including information, MIT Technology Review. Available at: https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/10/26/1061308/death-of-information-digitization/ (Accessed: 21 August 2024).

understanding. Moreover, the incessant churn of language mirrors the broader commodification of communication, where words and phrases are treated as disposable commodities, designed to be consumed, and replaced as quickly as possible. This has a corrosive effect on the power of language to convey truth, foster understanding, and build social cohesion. The sheer volume of information—and by extension, language—leads to a kind of cultural amnesia, where significant ideas and expressions are lost in the noise, leaving behind a society that is increasingly disconnected and disoriented. Just as the physical and digital artefacts of our civilisation are at risk of disappearing, so are the words and ideas that define our cultural and intellectual heritage. To combat this, we must embrace a more reflective and sustainable approach to communication—one that values the enduring power of language to convey simple meaning, build human relations, and foster clear understanding in an increasingly fragmented world.

'Information has become a form of garbage, not only incapable of answering the most fundamental human questions but barely useful in providing coherent direction to the solution of even mundane problems. To say it still another way: The milieu in which Technopoly flourishes is one in which the tie between information and human purpose has been severed, i.e., information appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose'.
— Neil Postman, Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology

The promise of misunderstanding

In John Durham Peters' 'Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication'[28], the introduction delves into the complex and often fraught nature of communication, examining how the concept has evolved and why it has become central to modern existence. Peters critiques the notion that communication is simply a tool for mutual understanding, arguing instead that it often reveals more about our failures and the inherent barriers between individuals. The modern fixation on communication, he suggests, stems from a deep-seated anxiety about our ability to truly connect with one another—a concern that has only intensified with the rise of new communication technologies. Peters traces the intellectual lineage of communication, highlighting how it has come to embody both the utopian ideal of perfect understanding and the dystopian reality of persistent miscommunication. The myth of communication as an idealised communion of souls is a fantasy. Instead, communication frequently fails, leaving individuals isolated despite their best efforts to connect. This sense of failure is not just a modern phenomenon but has roots in historical moments and technological advances that have reshaped how we think about human interaction. The concept of communication is tangled with intellectual and cultural strands that reflect our era's struggles with itself. It is a term that carries with it a history of hopes and disappointments, symbolising the human desire for connection while simultaneously acknowledging the ever-present risk of miscommunication. The introduction emphasises that communication is not just a simple

[28] John Durham Peters (2000). Speaking into the air : a history of the idea of communication. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

exchange of information but a complex process fraught with the potential for misfires and misalignments. Communication is often marked by impasses and breakdowns. The historicity of communication means that our contemporary understanding of communication is shaped by specific historical conditions and technologies. Peters draws on Walter Benjamin's distinction between historicism and historical materialism to illustrate how the past is not a fixed, linear sequence but rather a series of ruptures and alignments that resonate with the present.

Communication, as we understand it today, was made possible by the advent of technologies like the telegraph and radio, which redefined the concept of a quasi-physical connection that could transcend the limitations of time and space. The meaning of the word 'communication', has also evolved over time. Originally rooted in the Latin 'communicare', meaning to share or make common, the term has come to encompass a wide range of activities, from the exchange of messages to the transmission of thoughts and ideas. Peters argues that the modern emphasis on communication as a means of achieving mutual understanding is a recent development, one that has been shaped by the demands of mass communication and the rise of new media. The critical examination of communication presents it as both a cultural ideal and a source of deep-seated anxiety. People are challenged to reconsider the assumption that better communication will necessarily lead to better understanding and allow instead that communication is often a site of struggle and conflict. By tracing the historical and intellectual roots of our current communication dilemmas, we should question the very foundations of how we think about human connection in the modern world. The quest for genuine communication is a complex, often elusive pursuit that goes beyond the mere exchange of information to touch the very essence of human connection. Our discussions of communication often focus on the technicalities of conveying information, but at its heart, communication is about bridging the human divide, understanding others, and fostering community. In every act of communication, there lies an element of risk—the possibility of misunderstanding, the challenge of conveying one’s thoughts and feelings across the chasms of individual experiences and perceptions. Yet, it is precisely this challenge of miscommunication that makes communication so vital and so central to the human experience. It is not merely a mechanical transfer of information but an art form that necessitates empathy, creativity, and a deep respect for the other.

Eutopia of communication

What are the optimal achievements of language? Where is the 'eutopia' of communication? ('Eutopia' is an achievable good place, while 'utopia' refers to an imagined place of ideal felicity that does not exist.) Insights from Geoffrey West’s lectures[29] on the universal laws governing complex systems offer a compelling framework to support this argument. In the quest to understand how language can best serve humanity, one might argue that the ultimate goals are simplicity and unity. These concepts, when applied to language, provide a foundation for clear communication, social cohesion, and the prevention of harm. Why are simplicity, clarity, and accessibility so important for optimal communication? Geoffrey West’s exploration of scaling laws, as discussed in his lecture on 'The Universal Laws of Growth, Innovation, and Sustainability', underscores the importance of efficiency in complex

[29] Joshua Spodek. (2018). 084: Geoffrey West, part 1: Simplicity beneath it all (transcript). [online] Available at: https://joshuaspodek.com/084-geoffrey-west-part-1-simplicity-2 [Accessed 11 Sep. 2024].

systems. He explains that as systems—whether they be cities, companies, or empires—grow, they must optimise their use of resources to remain sustainable. This principle applies to language as well. Just as a city must streamline its infrastructure to support a growing population, language must be simple to ensure that communication remains clear and accessible. Overly complex language, like inefficient infrastructure, can lead to breakdowns in communication, alienating individuals and creating barriers to understanding. The metabolic rate of organisms and systems must increase with size, requiring faster innovation to avoid collapse. Similarly, language needs to be efficient, allowing for quick and accurate communication. Simple language, like a well-functioning metabolic system, promotes adaptability by enabling ideas to be shared and understood swiftly, fostering collaboration and decision-making in dynamic environments. The role of networks and connectivity within cities can be applied to the concept of language as a social network. Simplicity in language strengthens these networks by making information accessible to everyone, regardless of their background or education. Just as a city thrives when its infrastructure connects all its inhabitants, a society thrives when its language connects all its members. This inclusivity is crucial for maintaining social cohesion and ensuring that diverse populations can participate fully in the exchange of ideas.

The principles of a 'eutopian' community are unity, cohesion, and shared identity. However, growth can challenge the cohesion of complex entities like cities and empires. As these complex systems expand, maintaining unity becomes increasingly difficult. In the context of language, unity is the glue that holds societies together. A shared language fosters a collective identity, much like a city's infrastructure fosters a sense of community. When people share a common language, it creates bonds that transcend individual differences, much like the shared infrastructure of a city that connects its diverse inhabitants. When the number of language users grows, the unity and shared identity diminish. A unified language ensures that complex social, cultural, and ideological networks remain strong. Language serves as the medium through which shared meaning is conveyed, allowing for a collective understanding of values and ideas. This shared meaning is essential for building trust and cooperation within a society, much like the networks that sustain a city or an economy. The finite lifespan of systems emphasises the risks of fragmentation as complexity increases. Just as a city or empire can collapse if it fails to maintain its infrastructure or governance, a society can fracture if its language becomes fragmented. A unified language mitigates this risk by providing a common platform for dialogue, preventing the divisions that can arise when separate groups within a society speak different languages or dialects. The challenges faced by expanding dominant languages highlight the importance of balancing simplicity and complexity in preventing the disintegration of complex entities, be they cities or empires. While simplicity and unity in language are essential for social cohesion, there is a need for complexity in certain contexts. Just as cities require complex infrastructure to support their growth, specialised fields require precise language to express nuanced ideas. The challenge lies in balancing this complexity with the broader need for simplicity and unity, ensuring that specialised language does not create divisions or alienate people from the shared linguistic network. Drawing on Geoffrey West’s insights into the dynamics of growth and sustainability in complex systems, we can see that simplicity and unity in language are analogous to the optimisation of resources and the maintenance of networks in cities and countries. Just as these systems must remain efficient and cohesive to survive, language must remain simple and unified to prevent harm and foster a

healthy, functional society. Simplicity ensures clarity and accessibility, while unity maintains social cohesion and shared meaning.

2.3. Size and duration of meaning

Systematics of size

How does the size and longevity of a linguistic community influence the nature of language and the meaning of its words? Could the systematic rise and fall of empires lead to the decay of language? And does this suggest a potential threat of technocratic collectivism and the fate of humanity? In Rein Taagepera's 1978 work[30], 'Size and Duration of Empires: Systematics of Size', we delve into the cyclical rise and fall of empires through the meticulous charting of historical expansions and contractions. Taagepera's analysis, underpinned by detailed charts, reveals the fluctuating dominion of these colossal entities over millennia, illustrating their sprawling reaches at different epochs. This progression is not continuous but punctuated, marked by quantum leaps in territorial dominion corresponding to breakthroughs in administrative technologies and governance methodologies. These cycles reflect a dynamic interplay between the stabilisation around a mean size and abrupt increases in scale due to technological and administrative innovations. Societal structures manifest in discrete clusters rather than continuous distributions. Societies leap from the familial bands to tribes, then to chiefdoms, and onward to states, each jump facilitated by a critical mass that necessitates new forms of social organisation and conflict resolution. These theoretical frameworks underscore a broader, more systemic view of human organisation, suggesting that the size and complexity of social structures—from the smallest bands to the mightiest empires—are constrained not just by physical resources but by the capacities of governance and communication technologies. As these capacities expand, so too does the scope of effective control and cultural coherence within an empire. This phenomenon of expansion leading to collapse parallels the fate of language and ideas, which, while striving to encapsulate increasingly complex realities, eventually yield to obsolescence. The lexicon and models are emblematic of this transient efficacy, initially apt yet destined for eventual supersession by novel paradigms and understandings. The scope of a concept or term often predicates its impact, yet such impact is inherently ephemeral. The longevity of any given idea or term—its temporal relevance—is similarly bounded. Revolutionary concepts can become stale as newer, more robust frameworks emerge. The language that once adeptly ruled vast empires might now seem archaic or insufficient against new power discourse. Our communicative tools are subject to the same cyclical rise and fall as the empires they once defined. While we can approximate the durability of certain phrases or ideas based on their present utility and the cultural context, all linguistic concepts are temporal constructs facing inevitable obsolescence. The vocabulary and notions we employ to grasp our world are as fleeting as the empires. As these empires ascended, flourished, and waned, so too will the meanings we derive from them. This reflection on the ephemeral nature of both imperial and semantic constructs underscores that both the magnitude and the longevity of our understandings are indelibly tied to the contexts of their inception, all constrained by the inexorable march of time. In conclusion, Taagepera’s insights, while rooted in historical

[30] Taagepera, R. (1978). Size and duration of empires: Systematics of size. Social Science Research, 7(2), pp.108–127. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/0049-089x(78)90007-8.

analysis, offer a profound allegory for the lifecycle of the very concepts we use to understand human history. The evolution of empires is mirrored in the evolution of academic discourse, with each bound by the inevitable march toward greater complexity and eventual obsolescence. If the word empire (n.) means 'territory subject to an emperor's rule', then in today's world, is not the official language of a country the true "emperor" to which the territory is subject? The real ruler is keeper of all written history, traditions, statistics, laws, ideas, philosophy, and literature in the state. Whoever controls the general language and its flows controls the territory determines the empire's life cycle. The vitality of this language as a living system for interaction and the exchange of new ideas shapes both the scale and the lifespan of empires. When the language becomes "dead," like Latin, the empire it once sustained—like Rome—dies with it.

Linguistic innovation

The ephemeral nature of empires and the lexicons that delineate them are elegantly mirrored in Geoffrey West's work, 'Scale: The Universal Laws of Growth, Innovation, Sustainability, and the Pace of Life in Organisms, Cities, Economies, and Companies[31]'. West delves into the foundational laws that orchestrate the expansion and persistence of complex structures, shedding light on the temporal dimensions of human ambitions. West posits that scale laws—universal tenets applicable across biological entities, urban centres, corporations, financial systems, and languages—illuminate why certain entities prosper while others falter. Echoing Taagepera's insights on the ascension and decline of empires via the metrics of size and duration, West broadens this spectrum, asserting that the vitality of any system, empires included, hinges crucially on its resource utilisation efficacy, innovation capabilities, and operational tempo. Within imperial contexts, West introduces the concept of 'economies of scale', illustrating how magnified systems, be they metropolises, corporations, or empires, derive increased efficiency through expansion. Yet, this augmentation invariably escalates the challenge of maintaining a unified language, ideology, and purpose across sprawling territories. As empires swell, they grapple with escalating complexity and an augmented risk of disintegration. The 'pace of life' in urban and corporate environments is equally applicable to empires. System growth necessitates accelerated innovation and adaptability. For empires, continual innovation is crucial for managing vast lands and a diverse populace. The cohesion of an empire, maintained through shared ideologies and languages, is directly tied to its adaptive capacity. When innovation wanes and the operational tempo stalls, the integrity of shared meanings deteriorates, precipitating instability and decline. Sustainability and growth limitations offer a vital perspective on imperial downfalls. All systems encounter inherent growth boundaries that demand significant innovation or face potential collapse. For empires, this denotes a critical juncture where expansive size becomes unsustainable absent a parallel evolution in governance, communication, and ideology. A waning common language and the dilution of shared meanings indicate surpassing these growth thresholds. This analysis underscores the role of innovation in extending the lifespan of complex systems. Analogous to how corporations must incessantly innovate to remain competitive, empires require continuous cultural and ideological renewal to uphold unity.

[31] West, G.B. (2017). Scale : the universal laws of growth, innovation, sustainability, and the pace of life in organisms, cities, economies, and companies. New York: Penguin Press.

When the generation of new concepts, linguistic adaptations, and vision renewal diminishes, decline becomes inexorable. The fragmentation of language and ideology is not merely a symptom but a catalyst of decline, eroding the foundational fabric of the empire. Through this lens, the deterioration of an empire emerges as a scaling failure of meaning. Like physical growth, the capability of an empire to maintain a unified and cogent vision faces limitations as it expands. The true binding agent of empires is not merely their territorial expanse or military might, but the collective ideology, aspirational visions, and shared language that forge a unified entity. Like the rise and fall of empires, the magnitude and persistence of meaning are dictated by universal scaling laws. An empire's true strength lies not in its physical breadth but in its capacity to nurture a resonant, cohesive narrative that unifies its diverse constituencies. When this narrative unravels and the coherence of communal language disintegrates, the empire's fate is sealed. The concept of natural limits to growth holds that systems must either innovate dramatically or face collapse. This concept applies directly to the 'size' of meaning and language within an empire. As the empire grows, the shared language and ideology must scale to maintain unity. However, there is a limit to how far this can be pushed before the system becomes unsustainable. The fragmentation of language and meaning signals that these limits have been reached, leading to a decline in the empire's cohesion and eventually its power. West's 'Scale' teaches us that the expansion of language, akin to the growth of empires, must be both sustainable and adaptable, lest it inevitably lead to decline. As an empire grows, the 'metabolic rate' of its cultural and linguistic innovation must increase. This means that the empire needs to continually generate innovative ideas, adapt its language, and renew its shared narratives to maintain unity and coherence. If the rate of innovation slows down, the system (in this case, the empire) risks stagnation and decline, as it can no longer sustain the complexity required to manage its size.

Complex grammar

In 2019, researchers found that the number of people speaking a language impacts its grammatical complexity. The study[32] 'Larger communities create more systematic languages' shows that the size of a community influences how intricate the grammar of a language becomes. The researchers conducted experiments where small and large groups played communication games. They used made-up words to describe shapes moving on a screen, without relying on any known language. Over time, all groups developed new languages, but those created by larger groups were more systematic and structured, with patterns that made them easier to learn and use. The larger communities face more variations in how words are used, which can cause confusion. To overcome this, speakers develop a more organised grammar, making communication more efficient. This structured approach allows people to convey ideas with fewer words, enhancing understanding. Interestingly, this grammatical simplification might also impact human relations and emotional expression within smaller language communities. In smaller groups, where the language remains more complex, people may develop deeper connections, as the intricate grammar provides more nuanced ways to express feelings and relationships. The close-knit nature of these communities could foster more intimate communication, as the language allows for subtler distinctions in meaning. This

[32] Raviv, L., Meyer, A., & Lev-Ari, S. (2019). Larger communities create more systematic languages. Proceedings. Biological sciences, 286(1907), 20191262. https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2019.1262

finding not only helps explain why languages differ but also offers insight into how human relationships and social dynamics shape communication. As larger groups formed in human history, grammar may have evolved to help people communicate more efficiently in broader, less intimate settings. In contrast, smaller groups may retain more elaborate grammar, potentially preserving a richer, more personal mode of communication. Simplified languages, while making communication easier in large groups, could limit the depth of interpersonal relationships and serve the interests of power and control. In smaller communities, complex languages allow for richer emotional expression and nuanced social interactions, fostering closer connections. From a sociopolitical perspective, easy-to-learn languages favour uniformity, making it easier for those in power to control large groups. Standardised communication reduces linguistic diversity, limits subtle forms of resistance, and encourages functional over relational dialogue. Personal connection and emotional depth are sacrificed for the sake of efficiency, aligning with the interests of centralised authority.

The study demonstrates that larger communities not only create more systematic languages but also do so more quickly and consistently than smaller ones. Smaller groups tend to exhibit more linguistic variation, suggesting a higher likelihood of unique shifts in language use, often referred to as linguistic drift. More intimate groups tend to create languages that are more 'handmade' or personalised, with greater variation and subtlety, allowing for more flexibility in expression and adaptation to the group's specific needs and culture. This can result in a language that feels more intimate and nuanced, like something crafted to suit the close-knit community using it. In contrast, languages in larger communities are more like 'mass-produced' systems. They tend to be more standardised, structured, and efficient, designed to ensure clear communication across a broader and more diverse population. This streamlining sacrifices some of the delicate touch and complexity seen in smaller groups, favouring uniformity and clarity over depth and variation. The dynamics of larger communities drive the development of languages that are more structured and predictable, qualities that help ensure clear and successful communication. This highlights the significant role that community size plays in shaping linguistic structure, offering valuable insights into how social interaction scales influence the evolution of language. Larger communities tend to develop more systematic languages, but this shift toward linguistic organisation may negatively impact human relationships, emotional communication, and the sense of closeness in smaller groups. As languages evolve in larger populations, they become more structured and predictable. The 'evolution' is purely quantitative, and its goal is better control and manufacture of consent in big, diverse groups. This may come at the cost of emotional depth and personal connection that more flexible and complex languages in smaller communities foster. In narrower groups, where people interact more closely and intimately, languages often retain more variation and nuance. Larger populations require linguistic efficiency, leading to streamlined grammar and reduced ambiguity. This shift favours clarity over closeness, making language a tool for managing masses rather than expressing inner life. The result is less belonging, more conformity, and language as a mechanism of control.

Social scale

The research 'Social scale and structural complexity in human languages?'[33] explores the relationship between the size of language-speaking populations and the complexities of their grammatical structures. It highlights how linguistic elements, such as phonological systems and inflectional morphology, vary significantly across languages. Interestingly, a correlation is found that languages spoken by larger populations tend to have more extensive phonological inventories, but simpler morphological structures compared to those spoken by smaller communities. These findings emphasise the need for further investigation into how social environments shape the evolution of language grammar. Just as evolutionary biology links life expectancy and reproductive timing in mammals, human societies display adaptive behaviours driven by cultural evolution, such as social learning and behavioural flexibility, rather than purely genetic selection. The main idea is that linguistic structures are not random or isolated developments; they are deeply influenced by the social contexts of their speakers. The linguistic community must explore how social dynamics shape grammatical systems, advancing our understanding of linguistic evolution as an integral part of cultural progression. How does population size affect language? Is it true that 'simpler grammar means larger vocabulary'[34]? A fascinating contrast emerges in language dynamics: languages spoken by large populations often have simpler grammatical structures, while smaller communities develop languages rich in structural complexity. However, larger populations tend to create expansive vocabularies, whereas smaller groups may not. This inverse relationship challenges traditional language change theories, suggesting that the spread of linguistic elements depends on how easily they can be learnt and shared.

Basic vocabulary, which can be learnt with minimal exposure, spreads quickly in large populations. Ease of diffusion is the key. Complex grammatical systems requiring frequent, in-depth interactions are more common in smaller, tightly-knit communities, where regular communication allows for mastery of these intricate rules. Where vocabulary is more focused, communication tends to be clearer and more intimate. Shared linguistic patterns and familiarity with specific terms foster closeness and trust, as individuals are more likely to understand each other's intentions and nuances. The reduced ambiguity strengthens relationships by allowing for more precise emotional and interpersonal expression. In contrast, the larger vocabulary in more expansive, systematic languages used by bigger groups may dilute this personal connection. Speakers adapt to standardised forms, but the language lacks the personalised, culturally specific elements that smaller groups cultivate, potentially leading to more superficial interactions and less deep mutual understanding. The implications go beyond linguistics, hinting at patterns in broader cultural evolution. As societies grow and become more interconnected, cultural forms—like languages—tend to simplify. Historically, richly complex cultural phenomena emerged from small, actively engaged groups. In contrast, mainstream culture, influenced by large, diverse populations, often trends toward simplicity, as seen in the structural simplicity of contemporary popular music. This highlights an important insight: the

[33] Nettle D. (2012). Social scale and structural complexity in human languages. Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences, 367(1597), 1829–1836. https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2011.0216

[34] Reali, F., Chater, N. and Christiansen, M.H. (2018). Simpler grammar, larger vocabulary: How population size affects language. Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, 285(1871), p.20172586. doi:https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2017.2586.

structural complexity or simplicity of a language, and other cultural expressions, is not merely a result of the number of speakers but also of how effectively these elements are communicated and transmitted within the community.

Ideological competition

The paper 'Verhulst–Lotka–Volterra (VLV) model of ideological struggle'[35] by Nikolay K. Vitanov and colleagues presents a mathematical model to analyse ideological competition within a closed population (like a state). This model draws upon concepts from population dynamics and statistical physics, focusing on the spread and interaction of ideologies within a society. In societal systems, entropy—a measure of disorder or uncertainty—plays a role in the complexity of ideological dynamics. Societal development and ideological struggles relate to non-equilibrium systems like population dynamics, language extinction, and religious growth, reflecting how entropy increases through the tension between competing ideologies. Much like natural laws governing physical systems, ideologies spread and convert individuals through mechanisms of mass communication and interpersonal interactions. The entropy here manifests in how ideologies rise, collapse, or revive (the 'phoenix effect'), showing dynamic tension that reflects complex social evolution. The VLV model applied to ideological struggle adapts the classical predator-prey models from biology to a sociopolitical context. In the model, different ideologies (akin to species in a biological system) compete for followers. Two main mechanisms are considered for converting people to ideologies: unitary conversion (mass media influence) and binary conversion (interpersonal interaction). The model also allows for the emergence of ideological tensions as the number of competing ideologies grows. When only one ideology spreads, society reaches an equilibrium where some people adopt the ideology while others remain indifferent. With two ideologies, the competition for followers introduces measurable ideological tension. The steady state results in fewer followers for each ideology compared to a single-ideology scenario, due to the rivalry between them. As more ideologies are introduced, the system shows more chaotic and unpredictable behaviour, reminiscent of complex dynamical systems. Tension grows between ideologies as they vie for dominance, reflecting social entropy and increasing disorder.

An important aspect of the model is the 'phoenix effect', where an ideology that is near extinction can experience a resurgence due to environmental or social changes. This revival effect highlights the non-linear and chaotic nature of ideological competition, where slight changes in conditions can dramatically alter the outcomes, preventing the total collapse of an ideology and allowing it to affect the population once again. The paper underscores the relevance of modelling societal dynamics, especially the competition between ideologies, using principles from physics and mathematics. The VLV model captures the complexity and unpredictability of ideological struggles, where ideologies may rise, compete, collapse, and revive in a dynamic system governed by laws akin to those in nature, reflecting the entropic growth of disorder in ideological conflicts. The ideological clash described in the study can be seen as a form of manufactured disorder, particularly when viewed through the lens of entropy

[35] Vitanov, N.K., Dimitrova, Z.I. and Ausloos, M. (2010). Verhulst–Lotka–Volterra (VLV) model of ideological struggle. Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and its Applications, 389(21), pp.4970–4980. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physa.2010.06.032.

and societal dynamics. The model illustrates that ideological competition inherently creates tension and instability within a population. As multiple ideologies vie for followers, their interactions generate complexity and conflict, which can lead to increased social disorder. This 'manufactured disorder' emerges naturally from the dynamics of ideological competition, as different ideologies attempt to convert individuals through both mass communication (unitary conversion) and interpersonal interactions (binary conversion). The introduction of additional ideologies into a closed system amplifies this disorder, making the system more chaotic and unpredictable—like how entropy increases in a thermodynamic system when energy is spread over more microstates. The social and environmental factors that enable such a resurrection suggest that even after periods of apparent stability, latent ideological tensions can quickly lead to new forms of semantic disorder. In this way, ideological clash does manufacture disorder, not necessarily through external manipulation, but through the inherent dynamics of competition and tension between ideologies, which act as a driving force for societal instability and loss of meaning.

3. Semantic Equilibrium

3.1. Entropy of language

Systematic distortion of communication

What are the signs of societal collapse in a language? In his seminal 1893 text, 'The Division of Labour in Society', Émile Durkheim examines the societal role of institutions, differentiating between their normal and pathological functions, albeit acknowledging that interpretations of 'normality' can vary across cultures. Building on this tradition, Robert Merton applied the functional method to scrutinise social institutions, categorising their functions and dysfunctions as either manifest or latent. This approach aligns closely with Jürgen Habermas's notion of 'systematic distortion of communication' and the concept of 'communication entropy' defined by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. The functional method is instrumental in uncovering these latent dysfunctions and elucidating the process of entropy in communication. Originally introduced by German physicist Rudolf Clausius in 1865, the term 'entropy' describes the progression toward disorder and energy dissipation within a material system, a principle encapsulated in the second law of thermodynamics. By 1949, Shannon and Weaver had adapted this concept to communication, describing entropy as the predictability level or the expected average information in communication exchanges. This entropy indicates a natural trend toward increased disorder in closed communication systems, leading to diminished information clarity and systemic dysfunctionality. This phenomenon is evident in the manufacturing of dissent within communication systems, a disorderly form that destabilises the system, contrary to the order sought through consensus. The claim that entropy in communication leads to information loss and reduced efficacy[36] raises the question of whether the language's primary goal is to disseminate information efficiently or merely to capture attention, regardless of clarity. This entropy begins when one message is chosen over another, perpetuating with every subsequent modification, suggesting an inevitable decline in message intelligibility. This decline in

[36] Merrill, John Calhoun. Lee, John. Friedlander, Edward Jay(1990). Modern Mass Media, Harper & Row.

communicative clarity and the consequent rise in entropy are linked to the latent dysfunctions within the system, where increased disagreement and censorship, as seen in totalitarian states, exacerbate systemic entropy. The only mitigation is to ensure the communication system remains as open as possible, embracing a wide array of messages and minimal intermediary intervention. The Internet exemplifies this, offering a lower entropy environment compared to traditional mass communication systems due to its capacity for direct, unmediated connections among individuals. In 'The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action', Robert Merton[37] explored these dynamics, associating entropy with the unintended consequences and latent dysfunctions of communication systems in his discussion on the unforeseen outcomes of purposive social actions. Merton critiqued the hubris of educated elites who believe they can completely control complex systems, warning of the inevitable unforeseen and often undesirable consequences of such interventions. Merton's analysis underscores that while societies often strive for functional harmony, the reality is frequently more complex, with potential benefits and detriments varying widely across different social segments. This understanding challenges the notion that societal functions necessarily contribute positively to all community members, illustrated starkly by the systemic dysfunctions during South Africa's apartheid. An example of a situation where societies may not function equally well for everyone highlights that societal ideals cannot be trusted to work universally. What may be functional for some can be dysfunctional for others. A truly effective communication system should aim to foster feelings of consent and unity among all members of society as much as possible. To assess whether positive functions outweigh dysfunctions (or vice versa), Merton introduces the concept of the 'net balance'. However, since this societal balance or semantic equilibrium relies on subjective judgment, it is impossible to objectively quantify and compare the positive functions and dysfunctions to determine which predominates. In summary, the functional analysis of communication systems, while often criticised as conservative, fundamentally seeks to discern how societal stability can be maintained amidst the flux of changing ideals and information entropy. This approach requires a nuanced understanding of how societies manage the inherent tensions between unity and diversity, order, and disorder. In an era of rapid technological change and global connectivity, entropy in language dissolves meaning into noise and erodes its shared framework. Such breakdown mirrors and accelerates the collapse of the institutions and bonds it once upheld.

Paucity of informativeness

What is a 'semantic equilibrium[38]'? To what extent does everything depend on definition? How do people navigate the labyrinth of linguistic ambiguity? Humans define concepts subjectively, with these definitions being relative to the individual and their specific context, rather than being absolute or universal. Semantic entropy serves as a barometer of ambiguity and the paucity of informativeness in language. This lexical characteristic can influence any domain where the meaning of words is pivotal. As a concept borrowed from physics, entropy measures the degree of uncertainty or disorder within a system. Applied to linguistics, it gauges how effectively a word reduces uncertainty in communication, impacting cognitive processes.

[37] Robert King Merton (1936). The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action.
[38] Cedric Berger, P.M. (2021) Semantic equilibrium: It all depends on the definition, LinkedIn. Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/semantic-equilibrium-all-depends-definition-cedric-berger/ (Accessed: 15 August 2024).

This concept extends to the realm of natural language generation, offering a fresh perspective by assessing uncertainty in terms of meanings, not just word sequences. The notion of 'Semantic Equilibrium' hinges on subjective definitions crafted by humans, which are inherently relative and shaped by specific cultural and situational contexts. In the sphere of data management, what becomes evident is the communal nature of terminology—no single definition can be universally mandated within an organisation. Instead, the effectiveness of data governance lies in highlighting diverse interpretations of a concept, allowing for a natural consensus to form over time. This iterative process eventually stabilises, reaching a state of 'semantic equilibrium' where a preferred definition crystallises from the myriads of professional perspectives, though it remains subject to evolution as contexts change. This exploration of semantic entropy highlights the transient nature of language and its definitions, underscoring the planned obsolescence inherent in linguistic constructs as they continuously adapt to new informational needs and communal understandings. 'The entropy in language[39]' is used to quantify disorder and mirrors the inevitability of increasing chaos in isolated systems. It measures linguistic uncertainty. If language remains static, isolated from active exchange and evolution, it inevitably succumbs to obsolescence and falls into disuse. In the linguistic context, entropy manifests primarily in the ambiguity of words and phrases, encompassing both the diversity of potential meanings (semantic entropy) and the breadth of concepts a single term can cover (lexical coverage). The Efficiency versus Clarity problem refers to the trade-off between delivering information quickly and efficiently and ensuring that it is clearly understood. When messages are streamlined for efficiency, they often sacrifice some level of precision or clarity, which can lead to misunderstandings or ambiguity. This concept emphasises the challenge of balancing rapid communication while maintaining the depth and accuracy necessary for effective understanding. Languages often economise by assigning multiple meanings to single words, enhancing vocabulary efficiency but simultaneously increasing the potential for ambiguity—thus raising a language's semantic entropy. This trade-off between the economy of expression and clarity of understanding is a pivotal challenge in linguistic design. For instance, languages might use shorter, more frequently occurring phrases to streamline communication, albeit at the cost of increased interpretative challenges and slower speech rates necessary for comprehension. Conversely, reducing semantic entropy by limiting a word to a single, unambiguous meaning necessitates a larger vocabulary with potentially longer words, increasing the verbal real estate consumed in discourse but allowing for quicker speech delivery. The overall transmission speed of information remains constant across these scenarios, balancing word brevity against clarity. Predictability in discourse refers to the likelihood of which words will follow in a conversation, affecting how efficiently our brains process language. Familiar words trigger specific neural pathways, making recognition faster with repeated use. Strategies like maintaining consistent word order and using gendered nouns help reduce unpredictability by narrowing down the range of expected words. This dynamic reflects the ongoing balance between achieving communicative efficiency and maintaining clarity. As languages evolve, they navigate these forces, shaping how we express and understand meaning.

[39] Lo, J. (2018). The Entropy of Language - Language Insights - Medium. [online] Medium. Available at: https://medium.com/language-insights/the-entropy-of-system-life-and-language-43d89c0d185b [Accessed 19 Sep. 2024].

Emergence of consciousness

What is the relation between entropy, language, and the emergence of consciousness? 'The entropic theory' study[40] explores the emergent nature of consciousness from an ontological perspective, aiming to clarify the evolutionary mechanisms behind consciousness by aligning them with widely accepted scientific principles. It highlights the paradox of information behaviour within thermodynamic laws as a key framework. Like energy, information within a system is indestructible, following the first law of thermodynamics, and increases with entropy according to the second law. As entropy rises in isolated, emergent systems, information about their processes is obscured, maintaining the system's unpredictability. The emergence of consciousness is a self-erasing process, with its developmental steps hidden from view. This implies that consciousness is an entropic necessity, rather than a result of deterministic processes, and points to the impossibility of fully replicating consciousness in machines, given the unique entropy debt required by living systems. The relationship between entropy in language and the emergence of consciousness offers a profound insight into how complex systems, whether in communication or cognitive processes, evolve. Both phenomena are shaped by the same underlying principle: the dynamic balance between order and disorder, or entropy, which drives adaptation, complexity, and uncertainty. In language, entropy reflects the degree of unpredictability or disorder within a system of communication. As languages evolve, they face a tension between efficiency (simplifying structures for ease of use) and clarity (preserving nuance and depth). High entropy in language can lead to greater ambiguity and misunderstanding, while low entropy might result in rigid, overly structured systems that stifle creativity and adaptability. The evolution of language, much like consciousness, involves a delicate dance between maintaining enough structure to ensure understanding and allowing for the flexibility needed to accommodate new meanings, expressions, and cultural changes. This linguistic entropy parallels the process by which consciousness emerges. Consciousness, as suggested by entropic theories, arises not from deterministic rules or fixed structures but from the increasing complexity and unpredictability of living systems. As organisms interact with their environment, the influx of sensory information introduces entropy into their internal systems. The brain, much like language, manages this entropy by organising and interpreting inputs, reducing local disorder while increasing global entropy in the broader system. In this way, consciousness emerges as an adaptive response to the chaotic flow of information, enabling organisms to make sense of an ever-changing world. Moreover, just as language evolves to become more efficient in handling vast amounts of information across diverse groups, consciousness evolves to process and integrate the flood of sensory data into coherent thoughts and experiences. The 'entropy debt' of consciousness—a system's need to manage the disorder that arises from constant interaction with the external world—mirrors the challenges languages face in reducing ambiguity while retaining expressiveness. Both consciousness and language are emergent systems that thrive on the balance between complexity and simplicity, using entropy as a mechanism to adapt and evolve. This connection suggests that the emergence of consciousness, like the evolution of language, is not a product of static, linear processes but an entropic necessity. As living systems become more complex, their capacity to process, organise, and synthesise information grows, leading to the development of increasingly sophisticated

[40] Lugten, P.C. (2024) 'How entropy explains the emergence of consciousness: The entropic theory', *The Journal of Neurobehavioural Sciences*, 11(1), pp. 10–18. doi:10.4103/jnbs.jnbs_6_24.

ways of interpreting the world. Language and consciousness are intertwined expressions of this entropic process—both systems that evolve to reduce uncertainty and manage the flow of information, but both are also prone to the unpredictability that entropy introduces. In summary, the entropic theory of consciousness offers a powerful framework for understanding how complexity and unpredictability give rise to self-awareness. When applied to language, it reveals that the evolution of communication systems mirrors the same entropic principles, highlighting the shared foundations between cognitive and linguistic development. Both processes reflect the broader dynamics of entropy, suggesting that the emergence of consciousness and the evolution of language are fundamentally linked as expressions of life's ongoing struggle to balance order and chaos.

The art of disorder

Rudolf Arnheim's essay, 'Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order' (1971), though focused on art, discusses entropy in the context of social systems and communication. It provides a philosophical basis for understanding how order and disorder manifest in language and communication. 'The entropic decay of social systems is mirrored in the breakdown of communication structures, where language loses its precision and shared meanings become fragmented'. Arnheim's essay[41] is a meditation on the dual forces of order and disorder, often using the concept of entropy, which originates in thermodynamics, to analyse artistic creation and perception. Entropy, in this context, refers to the tendency towards disorder or randomness within a system, while order is seen as the organising principle that brings structure and meaning to otherwise chaotic elements. Arnheim argues that art represents a deliberate effort to impose order on the inherent entropy of the universe, creating meaning and beauty through structure and organisation. Just as art imposes order on disorder, language functions as a tool to bring structure and clarity to human communication. However, when language is subject to rapid change—whether through cultural shifts, technological innovation, or intentional manipulation—this can introduce elements of entropy into the communication process. In the context of planned obsolescence, linguistic forms and norms can be deliberately phased out or altered to reflect new realities, technologies, or cultural trends. This can lead to a kind of linguistic entropy, where the stability and coherence of language are disrupted, resulting in confusion or miscommunication. Arnheim's framework suggests that as language becomes more entropic, it loses its ability to effectively convey meaning, paralleling the way art loses its impact if it becomes too disordered or chaotic. Exploration of entropy as a metaphor for disorder in art can also be applied to social systems, particularly concerning social entropy and communication dysfunctions. Social entropy, like physical entropy, refers to the breakdown of structure and order within a society. When applied to communication, this can manifest as latent dysfunctions—misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and a general erosion of effective communication. Arnheim's idea that order in art is essential to creating meaning can be extended to communication: as social entropy increases, the order within language and communication systems breaks down, leading to dysfunction. This is particularly relevant in an age where language and communication practices are rapidly evolving, often driven by technological

[41] Arnheim, R. (2010). Entropy and art : an essay on disorder and order. Berkeley, Ca [Etc.] University Of California Press.

changes. As these changes occur, they can introduce new forms of communication that may not be immediately understood or accepted by all members of society, leading to a kind of communicative entropy. In art, as in language, the deliberate introduction of disorder or the premature abandonment of established forms can result in a loss of meaning and coherence. Planned obsolescence in language could be seen as a force that undermines the stability and continuity needed for effective communication, much like how excessive entropy in art can undermine its aesthetic and communicative power.

Essential order

For comprehension to occur within the human psyche, order is essential. The organisation is evident in urban layouts, architectural designs, tool arrangements, product displays, expositions of ideas, or artistic expressions like paintings or music, which are deemed orderly when they allow an observer to discern their overarching structure and detailed ramifications. Such an order facilitates distinctions and associations, essential for grasping the entirety and its components, highlighting a hierarchy of significance and control. Order, often first recognised through sensory perception, transcends mere visual or auditory organisation to reflect deeper physical, social, or cognitive structures. Progress inherently involves restructuring, as seen in revolutions that dismantle existing orders to establish new regimes. Evolutionary biology suggests that the drive for order is innate and crucial for survival, as observed in animal social structures and natural formations. Contrary to the natural inclination towards order, the Second Law of Thermodynamics introduces a notion of inevitable increase in disorder, predicting a universal fate of maximal entropy. This principle suggests a progression from order to chaos, where energy, while conserved, becomes increasingly futile. Modern information theory paradoxically associates order with information, defining it as a state opposite to entropy. Yet, it proposes that maximum information arises from total disorder, a perplexing assertion leading to conceptual disarray. In artistic contexts, however, regularity and structure enhance, rather than reduce, informational value—contradicting the notion that high entropy (or disorder) is synonymous with rich information. Artistic expressions often simplify complexity, striving towards minimalism or facing disintegration. This dualistic nature of art reflects a reduction of tension, either through simplifying structures to their essence or by succumbing to disorder. The artistic theme, therefore, must balance simplicity with complexity to convey profound human experiences. Artistic language transcends mere sensory stimulation; it reflects internal or functional order, portraying significant societal or existential themes. Therefore, the value of an artistic theme is not solely in its complexity but in its capacity to reflect a meaningful perspective on life. While high structural order is necessary, it alone does not suffice unless it encapsulates a substantive, truthful insight into the human condition. In conclusion, while natural forces and philosophical doctrines may predict a state of final equilibrium—a sort of entropic endgame—art exists not to halt life's flux but to encapsulate and interpret its myriad forms and phases, ensuring that even within a constrained frame, it reflects a dynamic, progressing vista of human existence. Artistic or poetic language, while it may seem inherently connected with disorder and decadence, serves a far more complex role. It transcends mere sensory stimulation or chaotic expression by reflecting both internal and societal orders, portraying significant themes about existence, identity, and the human condition. Poetic language thrives on the balance between structure and meaning. High structural order can be important in creating a cohesive piece, but order alone is not enough—art must also encapsulate deeper truths about human experience.

Through this lens, art is not merely an agent of chaos or decay, but a way to interpret and make sense of the constant flux of life, even when that flux involves moments of disorder or decadence. In this way, artistic language does not oppose the natural forces of entropy or societal decay; instead, it captures and interprets them, offering insight into the phases and transitions of human existence. Philosophical doctrines may predict a final equilibrium, a state of complete entropy or decay. Art exists to reflect the continuous unfolding of life, ensuring that even in a world moving toward disorder, there is always space for renewal, interpretation, and evolving understanding. Art stands as a reminder that the meaning of life lies in its transient nature, even as everything moves toward entropy and decay. Capturing the passing beauty of existence is its only goal.

3.2. Civilisation kill switch

Purposeless purpose

If the entropy of language is an inherent principle that restarts culture by manufacturing disorder, then art, myths, literature, and poetic language play a vital role in navigating and reshaping this process. These creative forms do not merely resist the chaos; they actively engage with it, channelling disorder into meaningful expression and renewal. Art provides a medium to confront and reinterpret cultural entropy, transforming chaos into forms that resonate on emotional and intellectual levels. It allows society to process breakdowns and transitions, turning disruption into something comprehensible and even transformative. Myths serve as anchors, offering timeless narratives that transcend the shifts in language and societal structures. As civilisation evolves, myths maintain continuity and coherence, preserving collective wisdom and shared human experiences, even in times of upheaval. Literature acts as a bridge between the past and the present, capturing the nuances of a culture in flux. It preserves older forms of language and expression while simultaneously exploring new ones, providing a deeper engagement with the entropy that drives linguistic and cultural change. The poetic language embraces ambiguity, metaphor, and symbolism, resisting the functional simplicity of everyday speech. By doing so, it turns the entropy of language into a tool for exploring deeper truths, creating meaning out of disorder, and giving voice to the complexities of human experience. Together, these creative forms of language help manage and harness the entropy inherent in civilisation and language, guiding the transformation and renewal of culture. They turn disorder into an opportunity for reflection, growth, and the continual evolution of meaning within society. The 'purposeless purpose' of art and the planned obsolescence of language reflect a shared paradox where meaning and value arise from processes that lack a clear, functional goal. In both cases, the purpose may not be immediately practical, but they are essential forces that shape human experience and culture. In art, the 'purposeless purpose' emerges from its ability to transcend utility. Art does not exist to solve specific problems or serve a functional role in the way that technology or systems of governance do. Instead, its value lies in its capacity to evoke emotions, provoke thought, and offer new perspectives. Art thrives on its openness and ambiguity, offering a space where meaning is constantly created and reinterpreted. Its apparent lack of purpose is, in fact, its greatest strength—it gives humanity the freedom to explore ideas beyond the confines of the practical and the immediate. Similarly, the planned obsolescence of language introduces a cycle of change that, while it may lead to communication gaps and dysfunctions, also sparks renewal and adaptation. Language evolves and shifts, and this

evolution is essential for cultural growth. As old words and forms become obsolete, new ones arise, allowing language to reflect the changing realities and complexities of society. The 'purposeless' aspect of this evolution lies in the fact that it is not always a conscious, directed process—yet it serves the deeper purpose of ensuring that language remains dynamic, relevant, and responsive to human needs. In this way, both art and the obsolescence of language share a 'purposeless purpose'. They do not adhere to a fixed, utilitarian function, but through their continuous cycles of creation, decay, and renewal, they sustain the fluidity and adaptability of human culture. These forces may appear directionless or chaotic, but they are essential for fostering the deeper evolution of meaning, identity, and connection within society.

Simple meaning

On the grand scale of civilisations, languages grow, expand, and lose their meaning as they become too large and complex. The semantic equilibrium—the balance between words and the concepts they represent—breaks down when a language scales beyond its capacity to hold meaning. This process mirrors what Geoffrey West describes[42] in the growth of cities and companies, but with a significant difference: while languages decay, cities continue to survive and even thrive. The reason is that cities are built on people, and people can easily create new languages when the old ones lose their utility. Language cannot regenerate itself without human intervention. So, a community of people with close relations and shared memories and traditions over generations is the most valuable entity in any civilisation because it can create its own language. This is what must be protected at any cost, not cities, empires, or any abstract knowledge. Without this 'human language machine' the ability of language creation is lost and whole civilisations live relying on foreign official languages. The potentiality for language formation becomes the absolute goal of any sustainable community of homo sapiens. Many tribes or ethnic groups with common heredity, who have maintained their traditions and lived in stable environments for centuries, have successfully preserved their languages despite the rise and fall of empires around them. The Basque people are a prime example of this. Despite being surrounded by larger, dominant empires like the Romans, the Visigoths, and later the Spanish and French kingdoms, the Basque language (Euskara) has endured for millennia. The Basque people have long regarded Euskara as a crucial part of their cultural heritage. Throughout history, even when the Basque lands were controlled by foreign powers, the people maintained a keen sense of ethnic and linguistic identity, resisting attempts at forced assimilation. In stable environments with consistent traditions, language tends to be passed down through generations as part of daily life. The Basques, like other long-surviving ethnic groups, retained traditional social structures, customs, and practices that reinforced the use of their native language. Despite the dominance of external powers, many communities develop strategies to retain their linguistic identity. The Basque people navigated the pressure from the Roman, Visigothic, and later Spanish and French empires by keeping their language alive within their families and local communities, even if the dominant political and economic languages were imposed in certain

[42] Longnow.org. (2024). Geoffrey B. West: Why Cities Keep on Growing, Corporations Always Die, and Life Gets Faster - The Long Now. [online] Available at: https://longnow.org/seminars/02011/jul/25/why-cities-keep-growing-corporations-always-die-and-life-gets-faster/#:~:text=The%20bigger%20an%20organism%2C%20the [Accessed 12 Sep. 2024].

contexts. While many groups like the Basques, the Welsh, or the Sami people have managed to preserve their languages for centuries in the face of external pressures, it is not a universal pattern. Other groups in similar situations have seen their languages gradually eroded due to assimilation, colonisation, or political domination. Nonetheless, the survival of languages like Euskara demonstrates the resilience of linguistic and cultural traditions when strong local identity, geographical protection, and community cohesion come together. The importance of Basque dialects lies in their role in preserving linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and adaptability. Unlike rigid official languages, which are often vulnerable to decay under empires due to their formalisation, Basque dialects have adapted to local contexts, maintaining flexibility and resilience. Each dialect reflects the unique traditions and geography of the Basque people, helping the language survive pressures from dominant powers like Spain and France. This adaptability contrasts with official languages, which can become rigid and detached from their speakers, leading to their eventual decline. The survival of Basque dialects shows that linguistic diversity and regional variation can offer more resilience against external forces, ensuring the language remains a living part of the culture. The example of 'Basque dialects' highlights that communities living closely together, protecting their traditions, and sharing common memories are more vital to cultural survival than official languages or knowledge production within nations, states, and empires. It shows that people precede language—the social bonds, shared experiences, and local customs are the true foundation of a culture's endurance. While official languages often become rigid and detached, vulnerable to decline under the weight of imperial or state control, dialects like those in the Basque Country thrive because they remain rooted in the daily lives of the people. These dialects are flexible, evolving with the communities that speak them. The connection between people—through shared traditions and memories—ensures cultural and linguistic survival, not the imposition of a standardised or official language by external forces.

Complex languages

As dominant languages become more widespread, like in the rise of empires, they initially bring innovation and coherence. Less popular languages gradually eroded due to assimilation, colonisation, or political domination. Over time, as official languages grow in complexity, they lose their precision, much like a company that becomes too large to innovate effectively. The intricate systems of meaning within the language decay, leaving behind a structure that no longer serves its original purpose. This is the fate of many dominant languages throughout history, from Latin to Sanskrit, which once held immense power and meaning but eventually fragmented and faded as the civilisations they served collapsed. However, cities and human societies, unlike languages, persist. Even when a dominant language loses its meaning, the people within cities survive by choosing or creating new, simpler, and more meaningful languages. These new languages, often used in smaller, more cohesive communities, restore a kind of semantic clarity and purpose. They reflect the immediate needs and values of their speakers. In this cyclical pattern, in which an empire's grand language decays and is replaced by the simpler tongue of a new tribe or community, the true glue holding society together is not the language itself, but trust, social cohesion, and justice. In this view, language plays a role in maintaining societal trust and justice, but when it grows too large or too complex, it can no longer fulfil that role effectively. It becomes disconnected from the people it serves, and in doing so, it loses its power. At that point, society risks collapsing unless a new, simpler language—rooted in closer human

connections—emerges. This is why human traditions, memories, and relationships kept in thousands of dialects are far more enduring than any single official language. Languages are ephemeral, but people and their cultures continue, reinventing communication in simpler, more meaningful ways, as necessary. As civilisations rise and fall, this cycle repeats: a grand language emerges with the expansion of an empire, loses its meaning as it grows, and is replaced by the language of a simpler, more cohesive group. The growth of cities ensures that people survive, adapt, and continue to communicate, but the languages they speak are constantly replaced, reflecting the underlying need for trust and justice rather than linguistic complexity. The complexity of social life, driven by the need to accommodate different regions, cultures, and purposes, leads to linguistic entropy—where the once-clear meaning of words becomes diluted, fragmented, and less precise. When linguistic entropy sets in and distorted communication threatens societal stability, it signals that the system has hit its limits. Yet, when that tool breaks, humans always find a way to build a new one, ensuring the continuation of their communities, their culture, and their collective memory—even when the empire's grand language has been lost to time. This entropy of language mirrors the overall disintegration of the empire itself. As the language evolves to accommodate more people and uses, its original structure weakens. Bureaucratic jargon, regional variations, and new terminologies proliferate, making the language less efficient and less capable of maintaining the cohesion it once provided. The once-unifying language, now burdened by its own growth, loses its ability to clearly express the core values, laws, and ideologies of the empire. Historically, this process can be seen in languages like Latin, which, at the height of the Roman Empire, served as a unifying force across its vast territories. Over time, however, Latin became fragmented into various regional dialects, eventually giving rise to the Romance languages. The same process occurred with Sanskrit in ancient India, which, once a sacred and administrative language, gradually became inaccessible to the masses due to its increasing complexity and exclusivity. As the language decays, it no longer effectively binds the empire's diverse populations. Communication breaks down, and with it, the shared sense of purpose and identity that once held the empire together. This linguistic fragmentation mirrors the political and social fragmentation that often accompanies the decline of empires. The collapse of the language is both a symptom and a cause of the empire's downfall, as the entropy of language erodes the cultural and administrative coherence necessary for the empire to function. In this sense, the entropy of language serves as a kind of 'civilisational kill switch'. As the dominant language becomes too complex and loses its original meaning, the empire's capacity to govern, innovate, and sustain itself diminishes. Without a clear and effective means of communication, the empire falters, and the once-dominant language, like the empire itself, is reduced to a relic of the past.

3.3. Manufacturing disorder

Latent dysfunctions

It is indeed possible that language and communication systems are inherently prone to eventual breakdown. Language, like any evolving system, is subject to change, and as it becomes obsolete—whether through natural progression or intentional shifts—it contributes to social entropy, creating communication gaps. As outdated terms lose their relevance and new vocabulary emerges too slowly to keep pace, miscommunication grows, potentially disrupting social harmony and shared understanding. The increase in social entropy exacerbates these

communication dysfunctions, making it harder to convey ideas clearly and leading to more frequent misunderstandings. This destabilisation of language, marked by inconsistencies and ambiguities, weakens the bonds that hold communities together, straining social relationships and complicating mutual comprehension. The complex interaction between the planned or natural obsolescence of language, rising social entropy, and communication dysfunctions suggests that linguistic changes can lead to broader social upheavals. As language evolves or deteriorates, communication breakdowns increase, further fuelling social entropy and intensifying latent dysfunctions. This highlights the urgent need for a proactive, adaptive approach to language management and communication strategies to maintain social coherence and functionality as society continues to change. Without such measures, the very structure of language and communication could unravel, contributing to a decline in societal cohesion over time. Could the 'Made to Break'[43] principle of obsolescence apply to language just as it does to technology? The obsolescence discussion can be extrapolated to language, particularly how planned obsolescence affects societal functions and communication. Planned obsolescence emerged as a key strategy for driving economic growth in the 20th century. Manufacturers, starting with lightbulbs and extending to automobiles, electronics, and household goods, intentionally reduced the durability of their products to encourage repeated consumer purchases. This practice not only maximised corporate profits but also became a hallmark of consumer culture, leading to a cycle of continuous consumption and disposal. Just as products are designed to become obsolete, words, texts, and books can be seen as undergoing a similar process. Terms, phrases, and even entire languages may fall out of use as societal needs and norms change. In the digital age, where communication technologies rapidly evolve, language itself is subject to pressures that can render certain forms obsolete. For instance, the rise of digital communication has introduced new linguistic norms (e.g., emojis and abbreviations) that quickly replace older forms. This phenomenon can lead to a kind of linguistic obsolescence where traditional modes of expression are discarded, sometimes prematurely, before new forms are fully understood or universally accepted. This parallels the way consumer goods are discarded before they have outlived their usefulness. The relentless cycle of consumption and waste of information contributes to social entropy by fostering a throwaway culture, where not only goods but also ideas, values, and communication practices are quickly discarded. When applied to language, this throwaway mentality can lead to latent dysfunctions in communication. As language evolves rapidly—sometimes artificially or commercially driven by technological changes—society may struggle to maintain a common linguistic ground. This can result in miscommunication, misunderstandings, and a loss of shared meaning, all of which contribute to social entropy. For example, as newer generations adopt different communication styles, older generations may find it increasingly difficult to connect, leading to generational divides and a breakdown in social cohesion. This raises important questions about sustainability—not only in terms of physical products but also in terms of cultural and communicative practices. The relentless pursuit of the new, whether in technology or language, can have destabilising effects on society. Just as the environment suffers from the accumulation of waste products, society suffers from the accumulation of communication dysfunctions and the erosion of stable, shared language practices. The 'Made to Break' principle is an essential read for understanding the origins and consequences of planned obsolescence in modern consumer culture. The concept

[43] Slade,G (2007). Made to Break : Technology and Obsolescence in America. Harvard University Press.

suggests that obsolescence is not just about generating endless consumption but could be seen as an inherent principle that introduces disruption and disorder, potentially resetting the culture from within. By deliberately manufacturing disorder, planned obsolescence forces constant innovation and adaptation, driving both cultural and technological evolution. This cycle of breakdown and renewal creates a system where, paradoxically, disorder becomes the catalyst for continual reinvention and progress.

The madding crowd

The phrase 'madding crowd's ignoble strife', borrowed from Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', evokes the chaotic and unthinking nature of mass behaviour, where individual reasoning is lost to the frenzy of the crowd. Similarly, 'Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds'[44], in the original 19th-century text by Charles Mackay, delves into the dangers of mass hysteria, irrational trends, and groupthink. 'The Madness of Crowds' is an insightful exploration of human folly, collective delusion, and the often-irrational behaviour of groups. It emphasises how collective delusion can lead to widespread folly, whether in financial bubbles, political movements, or social trends. Large groups can often act in ways that are disconnected from logic or reason, driven by emotion, fear, or social pressures. The exploration of collective stupidity reveals the fragile nature of human society, where individual reasoning can be overridden by the dangerous dynamics of crowd behaviour. Political language has led to a form of collective irrationality, where nuanced debate is often overshadowed by rigid ideological frameworks. What becomes clear is that language plays a significant role in shaping crowd behaviour. As public discourse becomes more ideologically charged, abstract, and ambiguous, it loses touch with reality. Words are inflated with moral or political significance, their meanings stretched and reshaped to serve ever-shifting agendas. This 'linguistic inflation' detaches words from their referents and transforms them into tools of manipulation. In such a state, communication no longer serves understanding—it becomes an instrument for control, conformity, and emotional escalation. This process is especially evident in modern identity-based discourses. Concepts such as gender, race, and justice, once tied to concrete social conditions, have become increasingly entangled in symbolic battles. Language is used not to clarify but to signal allegiance, shame dissent, and enforce ideological orthodoxy. Terms are redefined, reloaded with shifting meanings, and wielded to silence nuance. As complexity increases, clarity diminishes, and the crowd's ability to think critically erodes. The result is not debate but dogma, not discussion but hysteria. Such dynamics are not unique to the present. Historical episodes of mass delusion also emerged through the inflation of language—rhetoric masking fear, slogans concealing contradiction. What is new is the speed and scale of communication. Social networks magnify linguistic contagion, accelerating the spread of simplified narratives and emotional responses. The crowd is now global, instant, and perpetually online. Language, in this context, becomes both weapon and virus—distorting perception while claiming truth. The core danger lies in how abstract language enables detachment. As words become ideological tokens rather than tools of meaning, individuals are alienated from reality. The more abstract the terms, the more easily they conceal contradictions and suppress dissent. Language ceases to describe the world and begins to fabricate it. In this fog of terminology,

[44] Mackay, C. (2019). Extraordinary Popular Delusions And The Madness Of Crowds. S.L.: Digireads Com.

people are no longer thinking but reacting. The crowd becomes susceptible to suggestion, its madness born not only from what it believes, but how it is made to speak. Thus, the madness of crowds is, at its core, a linguistic phenomenon. It is a collapse not only of reason but of meaningful speech. The ideological saturation of language fosters an environment where confusion masquerades as insight and where emotional allegiance replaces thoughtful engagement. The more language is used to obscure rather than to reveal, the more collective stupidity takes root. What emerges is a crowd united not by understanding, but by shared confusion—a society where meaning is manufactured, and disorder is the inevitable product of how we talk.

Honest thinkers

In every civilisation, the marginalisation and eventual exclusion of wise and intelligent individuals from the ruling elite is manifestation of decline. This is not about the exclusion of popular intellectuals or crowd-pleasing sophists, but rather the marginalisation of truly intelligent individuals who reject conforming to social norms or public expectations. These honest thinkers, uninterested in social acclaim, focus on deeper realities and long-term innovation. When society favours conformity and collective stupidity, sidelining these true intellectuals, it loses its capacity to progress, govern effectively, and adapt to challenges. Much like language entropy, which erodes the ability to communicate and sustain an empire, the marginalisation of these socially indifferent geniuses leads to intellectual entropy. The culture becomes dominated by shallow ideas and short-term thinking, resulting in stagnation and eventual collapse. This process ensures the exclusion of true wisdom undermines the foundation of its long-term survival. This phenomenon, where the true intellectuals are pushed out of the spotlight and replaced by a preference for conformity, mediocrity, or even collective stupidity, serves as a self-destructive mechanism within the system. The individual thinkers are replaced with intellectual class. When those who are capable of critical thought, innovation, and deep insight are sidelined in favour of more immediate, superficial concerns, the empire undermines its own foundation, leading to a cultural decline that precedes its downfall. Following the entropy of language this marginalisation of intellectuals erodes a civilisation's ability to govern effectively, innovate, and sustain itself. Language entropy refers to how, as a dominant language grows more complex and abstract, it loses its original meaning and clarity. This communication breakdown weakens the ability of the empire to coordinate, maintain coherence, and convey its foundational values. Just as a language that has lost its purpose becomes a relic, so too does a civilisation that fails to foster its intellectual and creative core. Without the contributions of the wise and the intelligent, an empire loses its capacity for forward-thinking governance, scientific and cultural innovation, and ethical development. When a society collectively embraces conformity, rejecting the challenging ideas and critiques offered by intellectuals, it stagnates. The creative forces that once fuelled its rise—philosophical debate, artistic expression, and scientific discovery—are extinguished. By rejecting the intellectuals, the empire imposed an inevitable self-limitation. As intellectual rigour, artistic creativity, and philosophical reflection are cast aside, the empire’s capacity to adapt and evolve erodes. What remains is a civilisation unable to respond to new challenges, a shadow of its former self, and eventually a relic, just like the complex and meaningless language that once sustained it. In this way, both language entropy and the marginalisation of intellectuals serve as parallel forms of decline, acting as natural limits to the lifespan of any empire. Both reflect an internal decay that, left unchecked, leads to

civilisational collapse. Therefore, the exclusion of the wise and the embrace of collective stupidity is not merely a cultural trend; it is the trigger of the empire's inevitable downfall. This highlights Schopenhauer's core idea that intelligence is naturally antisocial, whereas stupidity or simplicity tends to align with societal expectations and norms. 'All society necessarily involves, as the first condition of its existence, mutual accommodation, and restraint upon the part of its members. This means that the larger it is, the more insipid will be its tone. A man can be himself only so long as he is alone; and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is free. Constraint is always present in society, like a companion of whom there is no riddance; and in proportion to the greatness of a man's individuality, it will be hard for him to bear the sacrifices which all intercourse with others demands, Solitude will be welcomed or endured or avoided, according as a man's personal value is large or small, — the wretch feeling, when he is alone, the whole burden of his misery; the great intellect delighting in its greatness; and everyone, in short, being just what he is'.[45] Intelligent individuals, preoccupied with the broader, more abstract aspects of existence, are often alienated from everyday social interactions. This alienation stems from the gap between their intellectual depth and society's preference for superficial concerns, making them appear acerbic, absent-minded, or uninterested in socialising. This is a recipe for disorder.

4. Miscommunication Axiom

4.1. Utopia of communication

The stuff of dreams

The phrase 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on' from William Shakespeare's The Tempest can be interpreted through the lens of language, suggesting that human existence is fundamentally shaped by words, communication, and the narratives we create. In this view, the 'stuff' of dreams is language itself. Just as dreams are ephemeral, intangible creations of the mind, so too are we made of the words we speak, the thoughts we articulate, and the stories we tell. Language is not merely a tool for describing reality; it is the medium through which we experience and construct reality. Our identities, our histories, and our perceptions are all shaped by the linguistic frameworks we use. In this sense, we are 'made' of language, as it defines and shapes our consciousness, much like dreams do. The phrase underscores the idea that language, like dreams, is both transient and powerful. Just as dreams can dissolve upon waking, so can the realities we construct through language shift, fade, or change. It suggests that the very fabric of human existence — our sense of self, our understanding of the world — is woven from language, and thus, is as fluid and malleable as a dream. In The Tempest, Prospero's meditation on the fading spectacle of a masque becomes a reflection of the illusory nature of life. If we reinterpret the 'stuff' as language, Prospero's words point to how language constructs the 'great globe', the towers, temples, and all the structures of human experience. They exist not only in physical form but in the narratives and words we use to understand them. Human existence is inseparable from language. The words we choose shape our perceptions, our dreams, and even our identities. We are narrative beings, constantly engaged in internal and external dialogues that define our reality.

[45] Schopenhauer, A. (2021). The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer. Blurb.

Just as a dream is conjured from thoughts and symbols, so is our world conjured from language. Language plays a profound role in shaping not only our understanding of the world but also our vision of ideal societies. Our capacity for abstract thought, creativity, and collective imagination is intricately linked to our ability to use words to convey ideas, imagine possibilities, and construct virtual realities. Through language, we articulate desires, hopes, and visions of a better world—what could be seen as the creation of 'utopias'. The idea of utopia is inherently a product of language; it is born from our ability to envision alternate futures and express these visions through words. Philosophers, writers, and thinkers throughout history have used language to describe ideal worlds that challenge the imperfections of the present. The very act of imagining and describing utopias—be they political, social, or personal—is a testament to the power of language to shape collective dreams and ambitions. While language provides structure to our lives by giving form to thoughts and experiences, it also highlights the impermanence of those realities. Just as dreams are ephemeral, constantly shifting and dissolving, the realities we create through language are also transient. Societies, ideologies, and even personal identities can be redefined as language evolves, reflecting the fluid nature of human existence. Utopias, too, can shift from one form to another as novel words and ideas shape them. Language is thus both a tool for constructing lasting societal frameworks and a reminder of the temporary nature of those constructions. Just as a new language can build utopias, it can also dissolve them, altering perceptions of what is possible or desirable over time. In this sense, humans use language not only to navigate the world as it is but to envision and attempt to create worlds as they could be—utopias that are constantly shifting with the ebb and flow of the words and ideas that define them. The utopian paradox is that utopia also serves entropy. An image of an ideal world of plenty that eventually brings dissipation of energy and collapse and simplification of certain parts of the system. Like the principle of fluid pressure, if you decrease suffering in one region of the world you increase it in another. This is the law of constant scarcity. The natural end of the realisation of any utopia as a land of plenty is Calhoun's Rat Utopia.

Utopian mentality

Karl Mannheim, a seminal Hungarian sociologist and a foundational thinker in the sociology of knowledge, introduced transformative concepts in his pivotal work, 'Ideology and Utopia'[46]. Distinguishing between 'partial' and 'total' ideologies, he explored how certain comprehensive worldviews are uniquely shaped by distinct social groups. Mannheim juxtaposed these ideologies—systems that justify existing social structures—with utopias, which envision transformative societal changes. Mannheim developed the concept of the 'utopian mentality', characterised by its incongruity with existing realities and its potential to radically alter them. The utopian mentality is a linguistic construction that expresses dissatisfaction with the present and projects hopeful visions of a radically different future. While ideologies reinforce the status quo, utopias challenge it by presenting alternative possibilities. Language is central to this process, as it communicates both the critique of existing realities and the blueprint for imagined transformative societies. This mentality manifests in diverse forms: Orgiastic Chiliasm is characterised by spontaneous, revolutionary zeal without temporal or strategic consideration, often seen in the lowest social strata. Liberal Humanism

[46] Mannheim, K. (1936). Ideology and utopia. London: Routledge.

envisions gradual societal progress through reasoned reform, commonly upheld by middle social layers. Conservatism: looks to the past, idealising a return to or preservation of traditional values and structures, typically advocated by dominant social classes. Modern Communism predicts a structured, near-future societal overhaul, driven by organised political movements. Mannheim argued for a broadened interpretation of ideology, tracing its evolution from a tool for obscuring truth to a comprehensive framework influenced by a group's social position. He advocated for a 'general total conception' where all beliefs, including those of social scientists, are seen as products of their societal context. This perspective suggests that all knowledge is situational and influenced by factors such as class, location, and generational context. Today, Mannheim's theories continue to resonate, particularly his insights on how utopias shape historical movements and the dynamic interplay between ideology and societal change. His analysis remains a critical resource for understanding how societal knowledge and perceptions are intricately tied to underlying ideological structures. Karl Mannheim's 'Ideology and Utopia' offers an intricate exploration of the complex relationships between thought, society, and future aspirations. It stands as a profound commentary on how language and communication inherently foster utopian thinking. Through language, people can imagine idealised futures, critique current realities, and propose alternatives. It allows us to express desires for a better world, enabling collective vision and social coordination. As language evolves, so do utopian ideas, reflecting society's ongoing search for improvement and transformation. Yes, the pursuit of utopias often leads to revolutions, wars, and disasters. Idealised visions can become rigid and dogmatic, causing conflict and violence when imposed on others, resulting in societal decay and unintended consequences.

'Dead Men's Propaganda'

In her analytical work, 'Dead Men's Propaganda: Ideology and Utopia in Comparative Communications Studies',[47] Terhi Rantanen revisits the seminal phases of comparative communications studies spanning the 1920s to the 1950s in the United States. Rantanen employs a lens crafted from the theories of Karl Mannheim and Robert Merton, unearthing the intricate dynamics of ideology and utopia that governed the early explorations into comparative communications. This exploration not only brings to the fore the pioneering efforts that have shaped modern understandings of media and propaganda but also underscores the ideological biases that influenced these foundational studies. Her research delves into the archival legacies and case studies that reveal how the academic and non-academic sectors contributed to the development of communications studies, influenced heavily by the ideological and utopian frameworks posited by Mannheim. Rantanen highlights how these frameworks created biases in knowledge production, shaping narratives around generational conflicts and the societal roles of insiders versus outsiders. By revisiting these early scholarly endeavours, Rantanen provides a critical retrospective view that connects past methodologies and ideological biases to current challenges in the field, particularly in understanding the mechanisms of war and propaganda in the 21st century. Mannheim's concept of a 'crisis in thought' speaks to the deepening ideological divides today, where opposing groups no longer share a common language or discourse. This communication breakdown is significant in the rise of populism, which undermines pluralist values and targets key democratic institutions, such as the media, intellectuals, and international

[47] Rantanen, T. (2024). Dead Men's Propaganda. LSE Press.

organisations. Populism's attack on these communicative structures reflects a broader crisis in how truth and information are constructed and shared. The utopia of communication—that is, the idea of a shared, open, and truthful exchange of ideas—seems increasingly distant. Wars and conflicts underscore this, as the lines between news and propaganda blur, with each side viewing the other's communication as manipulative. In this context, Mannheim's call for 'Wissenssoziologie' (sociology of knowledge) becomes even more relevant, emphasising the need to critically assess how knowledge and truth are produced and communicated. Today, as academia faces external pressures such as reduced funding and political interference, the utopian vision of communication to foster understanding and societal progress is under threat. Comparative communications research is once again in demand, but the terms of debate are increasingly set by political forces, not by academics. In an age where communication is politicised, Mannheim's insights remind us that the pursuit of a utopia of communication—a space where truth and dialogue flourish—requires ongoing vigilance and critical reflection. The early comparative communication studies were driven by a utopian vision, centred on the belief that communication could catalyse global peace and mutual understanding. Initially, propaganda studies, especially during and after World War II, shaped the foundation of international communication research. Propaganda was often viewed as deceitful, foreign, and something to be studied in the context of national interests, reflecting an 'us vs. them' mentality. This distinction carried over into the development of comparative communication, which often relied on external, policy-driven funding, shaping its practical and political orientations. The utopianism in international communication studies is most evident in its idealistic view of communication as a tool for promoting world peace and fostering understanding among nations. This belief was institutionalised in frameworks like the UN Charter and later initiatives like the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which viewed global communication to resolve conflict. However, this utopian vision often clashed with the realities of political influence, funding pressures, and the need for pragmatic, problem-solving research. While communication was idealised as a path toward a harmonious global order, it remained a battleground of ideologies, with competing narratives and claims to truth. The legacy of this utopia persists, with scholars still divided on how best to use communication to achieve these lofty goals. International communication continues to struggle with the tension between utopian ideals and the practical, often politically driven realities of research, making it a field where ideologies and utopias remain deeply intertwined.

The myth of communication

Who created the myth of the 'positive value of communication'? The concept of 'myth' in a semiotic sense refers to an unspoken network of ideas that helps society understand certain topics. Roland Barthes' 'Mythologies'[48] (1973) is a collection of essays that examines how everyday cultural phenomena carry deeper ideological meanings. Barthes introduces the concept of 'myth' in a semiotic sense, where myths are not traditional stories but rather systems of communication that naturalise cultural and ideological messages. Myths, according to Barthes, serve to make socially and historically constructed meanings appear natural, timeless, and inevitable. This process of 'naturalisation' masks the fact that these meanings are products of signifying struggles—ideological battles over meaning within a society. Through his analysis of

[48] Barthes, R. (1973). Mythologies. St. Albans: Paladin

various cultural objects and practices, Barthes reveals how myths function to reinforce dominant ideologies by presenting them as common sense, thereby obscuring their constructed and contingent nature. The connection between nature and language is explored through the concept of discourse. A linguist's definition of discourse as 'language in use' intersects with a social theorist's view of discourse as 'a social construction of reality' or a 'form of knowledge'. By analysing discourses, we can identify how certain representations of communication processes become 'naturalised', meaning they are accepted as natural or inevitable. This masks the fact that these representations often embody political or ideological positions, making them appear neutral and unquestioned. In his insightful analysis, 'The Myth of Communication as a Positive Value', Federico Boni delves into the idealised notion of communication as inherently beneficial. 'This is the 'dark side' of the paradoxical quality of all communication utopias, which began at least with the myth of the Tower of Babel, simultaneously the symbol of a utopia of communication and of the disastrous consequences that followed when attempting to build that very utopia'.[49] Boni interrogates the utopian framing of communication, pointing out that historical and contemporary discourse is saturated with both technological and social utopias. He challenges the dichotomies often found in communication theories—such as communication versus miscommunication and utopia versus dystopia—proposing a more nuanced understanding of how communication functions within societal constructs. Ideologies often serve concrete political or social agendas, shaping public perception and stabilising existing power structures. The utopian visions are not just abstract aspirations but have real-world implications that can reinforce or challenge the status quo. The concept of 'myth' reveals how certain normalised views of communication obscure their underlying political and ideological biases. This naturalisation process renders complex social and historical forces as inevitable or timeless, masking their constructed and contingent nature. By dissecting the discourses surrounding communication, we can expose how certain representations become incorporated, turning complex social constructs into 'common sense'. This critique not only highlights the ideological underpinnings of supposed communication utopias but also underscores the role of scholars and practitioners in perpetuating or challenging these myths. A critical analysis of the mythologisation of communication as an inherently positive force calls for a revaluation of how communication theories and practices can, at times, obscure rather than illuminate the dynamics of power and social change. The dystopian view of communication reflects concerns and anxieties that have arisen from mass communication, symbolising the darker side of communication technology and its complex impact on society.

4.2. Dystopia of miscommunication

A new physics theory of life

Jeremy England[50] has proposed the provocative idea of 'dissipation-driven adaptation' that life exists because the law of increasing entropy drives matter to acquire lifelike physical

[49] Boni, Federico. (2016) "The Utopia of Communication The Myth of Communication as a Positive Value." Utopian Discourses Across Cultures: Scenarios in Effective Communication to Citizens and Corporations, edited by Miriam Bait et al., Peter Lang AG, 2016, pp. 27–42. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4bv7.5. (Accessed 26 Aug. 2024.)

[50] *A new physics theory of life by Katherine Taylor*, *Quanta Magazine*. (2019) Available at: https://www.quantamagazine.org/a-new-thermodynamics-theory-of-the-origin-of-life-20140122/ (Accessed: 20 August 2024).

properties. The theory suggests that life inherently arises as a function of the laws governing entropy, proposing that biological systems develop lifelike properties as a natural consequence of energy dispersion. Communication, like life, can be seen as a system optimised to capture and dissipate energy, but through the exchange of information. Traditional views attribute life's emergence to chance events within a primordial environment. In contrast, England's hypothesis posits that life's emergence is a predictable outcome of entropy's influence on matter, akin to rocks predictably rolling downhill due to gravity. Life distinguishes itself from non-living carbon compounds by its superior ability to capture and dissipate environmental energy. England's mathematical model, grounded in established physics, describes how atom groups, when driven by external energy sources like sunlight and surrounded by a heat bath such as an ocean, will reorganise to dissipate energy more efficiently over time, potentially leading to life-like attributes. England's hypothesis represents a pioneering intersection of thermodynamics and biology, suggesting that the characteristics of life are a predictable outcome of the laws of physics. This perspective offers a fresh lens through which to view biological emergence, challenging traditional notions of life's randomness and positioning it as an expected consequence of thermodynamic principles. As research progresses, these ideas either will find empirical support or prompt new theories, enriching our understanding of life's origins in the context of physical law. The theory that life arises from the law of increasing entropy can also be applied to human language, communication, and society, suggesting that all follow the same natural laws of entropy. Just as entropy drives physical systems toward disorder and energy dissipation, it similarly impacts human cultural systems, leading to a gradual breakdown of structure, including the utopian ideal of communication. In this view, language and communication evolve not toward perfect clarity but toward disorder. Language, like any system governed by entropy, becomes less structured and more chaotic over time. As words lose meaning, linguistic structures simplify, and cultural shifts render certain expressions obsolete, the system generates disorder. This is comparable to the physical entropy that drives biological systems to reorganise, as described in England's theory, where matter evolves to dissipate energy more efficiently. Language, in turn, disperses information across social networks, but as this process continues, it introduces gaps, ambiguities, and eventual breakdowns. This leads to the dystopia of communication—language cannot perfectly convey meaning and unite people. The evolution of language means that miscommunication, ambiguity, and eventual fragmentation are inevitable. Just as the rise of entropy in isolated systems leads to a loss of order, the rise of linguistic entropy leads to the loss of precise, shared meanings. Art, myths, literature, and poetic language can be seen as human attempts to resist or channel this entropic force. They encapsulate meaning, stabilise communication, and create symbolic structures that push back against the natural drift toward disorder. However, they are not immune to entropy themselves. Over time, these cultural forms, too, evolve, adapt, and eventually decay, giving way to new forms that continue the cycle. In conclusion, both life and language are governed by the same entropic laws, making disorder and decay inherent in their progression. The quest for a perfect, utopian communication system is ultimately thwarted by the very forces that shape the evolution of life itself. Entropy ensures that both biological and cultural systems—including human language—are in constant flux, inevitably leading to disorder, chaos, and transformation. Just as England suggests that matter organises itself to dissipate energy effectively under the law of increasing

entropy, one might argue that linguistic systems reorganise to dissipate information effectively across social networks. The 'energy' in this analogy is information, and like energy, information tends to spread out unless constrained by societal norms or linguistic rules. Entropy increase inevitably leads to the 'meaning death' or maximal entropy state in linguistic systems where the language becomes overly simplified or homogenised. The notion that both life and language are underpinned by similar thermodynamic principles highlights a fascinating universality in how complex systems, whether biological or cultural, behave and evolve over time.

Evolution and complexity

The Assembly Theory[51] (AT), is a novel framework that redefines how we understand the emergence and evolution of complex systems, including objects, biological entities, and even language. The theory posits that complexity can be quantified by the 'assembly index', which measures the minimum number of steps required to construct an object from its basic components. This concept extends beyond physical objects, applying to abstract constructs like language and mathematical theorems. The theory suggests that language, like any other complex system, evolves through a process of selection where simpler, more efficient forms are favoured. Over time, this could lead to the 'planned obsolescence' of certain linguistic structures or words as they are replaced by more streamlined alternatives that require fewer steps to convey the same meaning. As language evolves, older forms may become obsolete, like how outdated technologies are phased out. The application of Assembly Theory to language highlights how systemic miscommunication could arise from differences in the 'assembly index' of linguistic constructs. If two speakers use language with various levels of complexity or steps, this could lead to misunderstandings, as the listener may not accurately reconstruct the intended meaning. The theory implies that reducing the assembly index could minimise miscommunication, making language more universally accessible. AT also provides insights into the origin of language by framing it as a complex system that evolved through selection processes. Just as physical objects and biological systems are shaped by their assembly history, language is seen as an emergent property influenced by historical and causal factors. The evolution of language, therefore, can be understood as a series of selected steps that optimised communication, making it a product of both historical contingency and the need for efficient information transfer. Simpler forms of communication, requiring fewer steps to produce and understand, would have been favoured in early language development, with more complex structures emerging over time. Language, like biological systems, likely evolved through a form of selection, where efficient and easy-to-learn elements (those with lower assembly indexes) were more likely to survive and be passed down. Assembly Theory offers a unique perspective on the evolution and complexity of language, suggesting that it evolves through a process like natural selection, where simpler, more efficient forms gradually replace older, more complex ones. This evolution can lead to planned obsolescence and systemic miscommunication, with the origins of language rooted in the same principles that govern the formation of complex objects in nature. Assembly

[51] Sharma, A., Czégel, D., Lachmann, M., Kempes, C.P., Walker, S.I. and Cronin, L. (2023). Assembly theory explains and quantifies selection and evolution. Nature, [online] pp.1–8. doi:https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06600-9.

Theory and the Entropy of Language suggest that instead of a utopia of perfect communication, natural laws governing language and society lead us toward a dystopia of miscommunication. Both theories point to how systems—whether biological, social, or linguistic—evolve through processes that favour efficiency, yet these same processes introduce disorder over time. Assembly Theory posits that language evolves to minimise complexity, favouring simpler structures that require fewer steps to create and understand. However, as language adapts and simplifies to meet the demands of communication, it also loses nuance, precision, and clarity, contributing to greater entropy. Over time, this leads to a breakdown in shared meaning, where miscommunication and misunderstandings become more frequent. Similarly, the Entropy of Language, as explained through natural laws, implies that systems—such as life and language—move toward increasing disorder. In language, the drive to efficiently transmit information parallels the dissipation of energy in physical systems, but this very efficiency can lead to instability and fragmentation. Language, therefore, could be seen as a tool for organising social interaction and managing cognitive load, helping humans dissipate social and informational energy through communication. Historical contingencies and social factors further shape language's evolution, making it more susceptible to breakdowns in communication. The dystopian outcome arises from this inevitable increase in entropy: language, once seen as a tool for cohesion and understanding, slowly deteriorates into miscommunication as it becomes more generalised and simplified. This disorder reflects a fundamental law of both nature and society, where complexity emerges and evolves but ultimately gives way to chaos and unpredictability. Thus, the natural trajectory of language and society leads us not toward a utopian ideal of perfect communication, but toward a dystopian reality where miscommunication is inevitable due to the entropic forces at play.

'Muqaddimah'

Why do cities keep growing, languages die, and life accelerates? What is the connection between the fragility of language and the enduring power of human communities? According to Geoffrey West[52], there are mechanisms behind the rise and fall of cities and corporations. But these cycles relate to the ephemeral nature of the languages that accompany them. Like biological systems, languages grow, expand, and eventually decay when their meaning becomes too diffuse. As languages get larger, their capacity to hold precise meaning diminishes, leading to a breakdown in what can be called 'semantic equilibrium'. Yet, just as cities persist through change, so do people. Even as languages die, human memory, culture, and the fundamental need for social trust remain, constantly giving birth to new, simpler, and more meaningful forms of communication. In this way, human beings adapt, reinvent language, and continue to thrive. West, a physicist and former president of the Santa Fe Institute, has long focused on the scalability of cities and the networks that allow them to grow. He draws parallels between biological systems, cities, and social organisations, all of which are complex adaptive systems. His research has revealed that cities follow certain universal scaling laws—laws that not only govern their growth but also their resilience. As cities grow larger, their 'dimensionality'

[52] Edge.org. (2024). Why cities keep growing corporations and people always die, and life gets faster| Edge.org. [online] Available at: https://www.edge.org/conversation/geoffrey_west-why-cities-keep-growing-corporations-and-people-always-die-and-life-gets [Accessed 12 Sep. 2024].

increases, allowing for more opportunities, more jobs, and more innovation. This is much like how languages, as they grow, initially foster innovation and creativity. But over time, just as corporations buckle under the weight of bureaucratic inefficiencies, languages too begin to collapse under their complexity, losing their ability to convey meaning effectively. The remarkable thing about big cities, West notes, is that they can support a great deal of diversity—even what is considered not normal or even 'crazy' in small villages and tribes. This tolerance for difference is one of the reasons why cities survive and thrive. People bring innovation, fresh ideas, and adaptability. But the language used within a city, or an empire, does not enjoy the same robustness. As civilisations grow, the languages they use tend to become more complex, formal, and distanced from the lived experiences of ordinary people. They lose meaning, just as corporations lose their innovative edge as they scale and are consumed by bureaucracy. Languages, like corporations, become rigid, one-dimensional, and incapable of fostering creativity. This process of decay is inevitable in large, complex systems that cannot maintain their original flexibility. The innovation that once drove these languages or companies forward is replaced by administrative maintenance, and eventually, both lose the ability to serve their original purpose. They become relics of a prior time, unable to keep up with the faster pace of life that the West describes in cities. But why do cities persist? Because cities are people, and people are always creating new ways to communicate, new ways to understand each other, and new ways to build trust. Language, in this sense, is ephemeral, a tool that can be discarded when it no longer serves its purpose. What remains is the need for connection and the trust that holds society together. This echoes Ibn Khaldun's insights in 'Muqaddimah', where he argues that the real glue of society is not language or knowledge, but trust in others and a sense of justice. Without trust, society collapses—whether that society is built around a decaying language or a dying corporation. The living cycle of a community is connected to the level of simplicity of its language. As empires expand, their languages grow complex and abstract, losing emotional intimacy and clarity. Ambiguity and doublespeak erode trust, weakening the social fabric. When these languages collapse under their weight, simpler, more meaningful languages emerge from smaller groups, reviving direct human connection. Like Latin giving way to the Romance tongues, new languages carry cultural memory and rebuild broken communities. Cities endure not through language alone, but through the trust and cohesion of their people. As life accelerates, old systems break, but people adapt—creating new forms of speech, trust, and justice. Language may die, but human connection survives.

Miscommunication axioms

An axiom, postulate, or assumption represents a statement accepted as true without requiring proof, serving as a foundational premise for further reasoning and discussions. Originating from the Ancient Greek ἀξίωμα (axioma), the term signifies 'that which is deemed worthy or fit' or 'that which presents itself as self-evident'. A miscommunication axiom would serve as a foundational truth about how communication can inherently fail or lead to misunderstanding, much like Paul Watzlawick's axioms highlight the complexities of human interaction. Such an axiom would assert that miscommunication is inevitable due to the inherent complexity of language, context, and perception. Even the simplest exchanges can be interpreted in multiple ways, influenced by factors like individual experiences, emotional states, or cultural contexts. The dystopia of miscommunication has become an unavoidable reality of human life in civilisation, starkly contrasting with the long-held utopian belief that communication can

bridge all gaps and foster perfect understanding. For years, researchers have envisioned communication as a powerful tool for connection, believing that with the right methods, human interaction could transcend misunderstandings and bring about unity and progress. This utopia of communication—where clear, seamless exchanges lead to social harmony—has been a guiding ideal in communication theory. However, life in sprawling urban environments and virtual realities exposes a different truth: Miscommunication is inevitable. In these vast, complex social networks, the sheer volume of interactions, coupled with diverse cultural, linguistic, and personal differences, makes perfect communication unattainable. The noise of city life, both literal and metaphorical, drowns out attempts at clarity. Messages are constantly distorted, misunderstood, or lost in translation as individuals interpret words, gestures, and silences through the lens of their own experiences and contexts. In this dystopia of miscommunication, even simple exchanges are fraught with the potential for misunderstanding. The foundational truth, or miscommunication axiom, is that human communication in large, fast-paced societies is naturally fragmented. Nonverbal cues often contradict spoken words, and the context that frames a message is rarely shared fully between individuals. The idea of shared understanding collapses under the weight of competing interpretations, emotional states, and cultural divides. This dystopian reality stands in sharp opposition to the utopia of communication imagined by scholars like Paul Watzlawick, where dialogue is seen as the path to resolving conflict and building trust. The dream of universal understanding falters when faced with the chaotic, ever-shifting nature of life in modern cities. In these environments, the complexity of human interaction leads to entropy in language—a breakdown of meaning where communication becomes less about clarity and more about survival during confusion. The dystopia of miscommunication teaches us that, rather than achieving perfect understanding, we must adapt to the chaos of urban communication. We must embrace the fact that miscommunication is part of the human condition, especially in large social systems, and focus on finding ways to navigate and mitigate its effects. In doing so, we accept that the idealised utopia of communication may never fully materialise, and instead, we must learn to thrive within the disorder of the communities and cities we inhabit. The five miscommunication axioms influenced by Paul Watzlawick would represent foundational truths about how communication inherently leads to misunderstandings and conflicts. These axioms outline the key processes through which human interaction breaks down, providing insight into why miscommunication is inevitable and how it can be managed:

1. Inevitability of Miscommunication

Miscommunication is unavoidable because communication occurs continuously, even without intention. Any behaviour, inaction, or silence can convey unintended messages that are often misinterpreted.

2. Misalignment of Content and Context

Messages are always influenced by the context in which they are delivered. Miscommunication happens when the content of a message does not align with the relational or situational context, leading to misinterpretation.

3. Diverging Interpretations of Interaction Sequences

People often interpret the sequences of communication differently, punctuating interactions in ways that create a cyclical misunderstanding. What one person views as a cause, the other sees as an effect, leading to endless communication loops.

4. Conflict Between Verbal and Nonverbal Cues
Miscommunication arises when there is a mismatch between the digital (verbal) and analogic (nonverbal) components of communication. Discrepancies between what is said and how it is said cause confusion and conflict.
5. Imbalance of Power in Communication
Interactions can be either symmetrical (equal) or complementary (imbalanced). Miscommunication frequently occurs when power dynamics shift, either creating conflict in symmetrical relationships or exacerbating inequality in complementary ones.

4.3. Punk Rhetoric

'Communication Breakdown'

Punk is as much a cultural movement as it is a linguistic rebellion—one that embraces misunderstanding, miscommunication, and chaos. The rhetoric of punk is raw, stripped down, and unapologetically confrontational, reflecting its rejection of authority, nonconformity, and the polished promises of a bright future. Punk language does not seek clarity or resolution; instead, it thrives on disruption, disorder, and the breakdown of traditional communication norms. Its aim is not to build a utopia but to tell a dystopian, dark story of rebellion, alienation, and anger. Punk philosophy eschews the conventional drive for supremacy or superiority, embedding a deeper connection with the concept of planned obsolescence of language—deliberately designing products with a limited useful life. This ethos is mirrored in the punk movement's embrace of raw, unpolished energy over technical proficiency, and its celebration of the ephemeral over the enduring. The iconic riff of Led Zeppelin's 'Communication Breakdown'—predating and influencing punk music—illustrates this transition. Jimmy Page, the guitarist, acknowledged their pioneering exploration into new musical expressions, which later bands like the Ramones would evolve into a defining punk characteristic. Malcolm McLaren, a pivotal figure in the punk scene, managed bands like the Sex Pistols and the New York Dolls, effectively sculpting the commercial punk archetype. His epitaph, 'Better a spectacular failure, than a benign success', encapsulates punk's disdain for mediocrity and its embrace of bold, if not always successful, expressions. McLaren's influence was so profound that he has been likened to the Brian Epstein of punk, suggesting that without his flamboyant failures, punk might not have emerged as it did. Punk is not merely a form of protest but an act of sabotage against conventional success; it is made to break. Iggy Pop of the Stooges, often labelled the first 'punk', described[53] the term in an interview: 'They used that term for me to represent the idea of someone who wants to do something very strong and very uncompromising, that believes in or has a vision of very badly, but at the same time he's the kind of person who doesn't have the skills or ability to do it'. The planned obsolescence of punk slang is a deliberate simplification after reaching a peak in communication complexity of rock. Punk is both a musical genre and a philosophical critique of modern consumerist culture, emphasising decay over growth, and impermanence over permanence. The rhetoric of punk is abrasive, deliberately chaotic, and challenges traditional speech. Punk bands and individuals use

[53] Whatley, J. (2020). Iggy Pop reveals why he's considered the Godfather of Punk. [online] Far Out Magazine. Available at: https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/iggy-pop-why-godfather-of-punk-rare-interview-1977/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CAt%20the%20time%2C%20I%20was [Accessed 20 Sep. 2024].

lyrics and slogans that provoke and confuse, critiquing political power, corporate greed, and societal oppression without offering clear solutions. Words become weapons of disarray, with phrases like 'No Future', 'Anarchy', and 'Resist' encapsulating the punk spirit, painting a grim picture of society's collapse rather than a hopeful vision of what could come next. Punk's DIY approach extends to its very language, where disorder and imperfection are embraced. Punks create their zines, flyers, and slogans in ways that are intentionally chaotic—misspelled words, rough grammar, and fragmented phrases are part of the aesthetic. The goal is not clarity but a rejection of coherence. This broken-down rhetoric resists polished, commercialised language, celebrating the imperfection and chaos inherent in human expression. Punk's nonconformity does not just reject societal norms—it revels in linguistic disorder. The use of slang, blunt language, and shock value is not just a means of communication; it is a way of ensuring that the message may be misheard, misinterpreted, or rejected entirely. Words are used to defy and alienate, not to unify or conform. Punk rhetoric thrives in the cracks of language, where confusion reigns and conventional meaning falls apart. In this way, punk lyrics are not meant to provide guidance but to reflect the dystopian reality of societal breakdown, war, and inequality. The simplicity of the language often belies the complexity of the issues, leaving room for misinterpretation and pushing the listener to confront their discomfort. This aesthetic disorder is not a flaw but a feature—punk language is meant to destabilise, to disrupt any expectation of clarity or resolution. By rejecting polished rhetoric, punk emphasises the chaos of reality and mocks the notion of a meticulously organised world. Punk rhetoric fosters a community built on shared alienation and misunderstanding. The jargon, slang, and in-group language create a sense of solidarity among those who understand the codes, but it also excludes outsiders. This exclusion is part of the point—punk thrives on the tension between those who 'get it' and those who are left out, underscoring its chaotic and confrontational nature.

Resistant meaning-making

Punk rhetoric is a form of 'resistant meaning-making'[54] and a radical critique of communication and cultural norms. Much like the Beat poets of the 1950s and the Hippie 'Flower Power' movement of the late 1960s, punk arose as a counter-cultural force, challenging the prevailing societal constructs. Originating in Britain during the late 1970s, amid the rise of Margaret Thatcher and the economic malaise following the OPEC oil crisis, punk became the voice of the disillusioned working class, expressing their disdain for the bleak economic conditions and the rigid conservatism of the 'Iron Lady'. Dick Hebdige's analysis of punk culture[55] begins with the symbolism of graffiti, which he describes as a way of asserting one's presence against the backdrop of the dominant culture—'Your presence on their Presence… hanging your alias on their scene'. This notion of graffiti as resistant meaning-making extends to the punk subculture's appropriation of streets as dystopian spaces of miscommunication. These graffiti, inscriptions, slogans, and poetry transform the public space into a living, breathing critique of the status quo. Punk's rhetoric, which deliberately sought to offend and disturb, was a confrontation with the banalities of mainstream language. As Hebdige notes, the

[54] Winnsox.com. (2019). Punk: A Form of Resistant Meaning-Making. [online] Available at: https://winnsox.com/blog/entry/punk-a-form-of-resistant-meaning-making [Accessed 20 Sep. 2024].
[55] Hebdige, D. (2012). Subculture: The Meaning of Style. Routledge.

obnoxious, perverse, and abnormal were not just tolerated but celebrated, revealing the inherent absurdity of countercultural ideals that paradoxically became mainstream over time. Punk, in this light, is more than just a music genre or fashion statement; it is a critique of communication itself, exposing the waste and obsolescence inherent in conventional modes of expression. By embracing the impermanent and the provocative, punk forces us to confront the planned obsolescence not just of products, but of language, meaning, and the very systems of communication that shape our understanding of the world. In punk rhetoric, there is no assumption of passive consumption. Audiences are expected to misinterpret, misunderstand, or even reject the message entirely. This interaction is central to punk's disruptive nature—rather than delivering a clear, cohesive statement, punk media invites active miscommunication. This is not seen as a failure but as a core component of punk's strategy. By breaking down the traditional communication model, punk rhetoric forces the audience to grapple with the noise, creating a space where meaning is contested and reshaped by those willing to engage with it. Much like the idea that meaning is derived through interaction, punk rhetoric sees the audience's role as central to the creation of meaning, but in a more confrontational sense. When punk messages are cast into mainstream culture, they are often fragmented, intentionally provocative, and open to misinterpretation. The audience becomes complicit in this chaos, decoding messages within their own cultural and emotional contexts, often deriving meaning that was not explicitly intended. This interaction turns punk messages into cultural artefacts that reflect not consensus, but the very fragmentation and disorder they embrace. In the world of punk rhetoric, consumption of media is not a passive experience but a disruptive act. Punk messages are not delivered with the expectation of clarity or coherence but as acts of rebellion, where meaning is fluid and often chaotic. The audience is not a passive receiver but an active participant in the process of miscommunication, where the very act of decoding the message becomes a reflection of punk's anarchic resistance to structure and authority. Ultimately, punk rhetoric rejects the idea of the media as a controlled tool of elites, instead embracing its potential as a space for disorder, chaos, and misunderstanding. Through this lens, punk communication is less about conveying a single, unified message and more about disrupting the process of meaning-making itself, allowing for a myriad of interpretations and misinterpretations that fuel its anti-establishment ethos.

Deconstruction and authenticity

The article 'Postmodernism and Punk Subculture'[56] explores punk rhetoric as the intersection of 'deconstruction and authenticity' within a postmodern framework. This countercultural movement, much like its predecessors, arose as a response to what is termed the 'condition of postmodernity'—a crisis of meaning precipitated by the commodification of everyday life. In this context, punk offers two distinct, yet interconnected, responses: deconstruction and authenticity. The deconstruction within punk is deeply rooted in the postmodern ethos of irony, nihilism, and the rejection of fixed meaning. This approach mirrors the broader postmodernist trend of dismantling grand narratives and embracing localised, self-reflexive interpretations. Punk artists and subcultures, through a process of cultural recycling and parody, disrupt the dominant symbols and narratives that saturate social spaces. By

[56] MOORE, R. (2004). Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction. The Communication Review, [online] 7(3), pp.305–327. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420490492238.

repurposing cultural detritus—whether through fashion, music, or performance—punk exposes the inherent absurdity and fleeting nature of mass-mediated consumer culture. This deconstructionist approach is a critique of communication itself, highlighting how messages are often reduced to mere simulacra in a hyper-commercialised society. Conversely, the authenticity in punk seeks to reclaim sincerity and independence from the pervasive influence of the culture industry. This facet of punk is a direct response to the planned obsolescence of meaning in a postmodern world, where symbols and messages are rapidly commodified and stripped of their original intent. Punk's DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic embodies this quest for authenticity, creating a network of underground media and independent cultural production that resists the superficiality of mainstream culture. Here, the focus shifts from style to substance, emphasising the creation of genuine artistic expression free from commercial exploitation. These two strands of punk—deconstruction and authenticity—may seem diametrically opposed, yet they are both reactions to the same socio-economic conditions. The deconstruction aligns with the transient, spectacle-driven nature of postmodern capitalism, where meaning is constantly destabilised and repackaged. Meanwhile, authenticity attempts to build resilient communities and sustainable modes of expression that stand in opposition to this cycle of obsolescence. Punk's engagement with these dual strategies reflects the broader challenges of postmodern society. On one hand, the deconstructionist impulse within punk offers a powerful critique of the commodification of culture, using irony and parody to expose the emptiness of consumerist narratives. However, this approach risks becoming as ephemeral as the culture it critiques, lacking a utopian vision to guide its rebellion. In 'Punk Philosophy as a Path to the Summits of Ethos',[57] Vuk Uskoković contends that adopting a punk persona is an essential stage in an individual's ethical evolution. Punk, as a philosophy, challenges the established norms and critiques communication itself by embracing a form of creative destruction that aligns with the concept of planned obsolescence in communication. The essence of punk lies in its rejection of blind adherence to authority and its celebration of creative aspirations over technical mastery. This stance is exemplified by the minimalist ethos of punk music, which dismantles the complex structures of progressive rock in favour of raw, straightforward expression. Uskoković argues that this simplicity, much like the elegant minimalism found in fundamental scientific equations, underscores the punk ideal: it is not what one does, but the aspirations behind those actions that matter. The fervour to challenge and change the world infuses punk art with a timeless vitality, making it resonate even when stripped of technical sophistication. Punk's relationship with language is particularly subversive. Uskoković suggests that punk philosophy demands the destruction of language as we know it, to break free from its limitations and allow for the emergence of new, more vibrant forms of expression. This linguistic annihilation serves as a metaphor for the broader punk ethos—destroying the old to make way for the new, an act of self-annihilation that mirrors the seed’s necessary death to bring forth new life.

[57] Vuk Uskoković (2016). Punk Philosophy as a Path to the Summits of Ethos. [online] Chapman University Digital Commons. Available at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/pharmacy_articles/339/ [Accessed 20 Sep. 2024].

Destruction of language

The punk's destruction of language parallels the critique of communication. In a world where information is often commodified and reduced to waste, punk advocates for a radical departure from conventional discourse. By breaking the rules of clichéd communication, punk seeks to transcend language, using it as a tool for its deconstruction, thus paving the way for a more direct and profound engagement with reality. By walking the punk path, we are invited to ascend to the summits of ethos, where the interplay of freedom and constraint, creation and destruction, yields a richer, more vibrant understanding of our place in the world. Punk rhetoric serves as a way of revealing harsh truths about perversions of power and getting away with it. It can be compared to the role of the jester or satirist in the past. Historically, the court jester had a unique position: they were allowed, and often expected, to mock the powerful, speak uncomfortable truths, and expose the absurdities of the ruling class and society at large. Because they occupied the role of the 'fool', they could tell the truth in ways that others could not, often masking sharp critiques of power behind humour, absurdity, and seemingly nonsensical behaviour. This allowed the jester to 'get away with it' because their mockery was framed as entertainment rather than direct rebellion. Punk rhetoric operates in a similar fashion. It uses chaos, absurdity, and the rawness of expression to challenge authority and societal norms. Much like the jester, punk is disruptive—it rejects the polished, structured, and sanctioned modes of communication, instead embracing disorder, simplicity, and rebellion. This makes its critique of power subversive, as it often uses the language of the irrational or the extreme to expose the perversions of power. Both jester satire and punk poetics serve to peel back the facade of power by playing the role of the outsider, embracing a 'foolish' or chaotic perspective to speak truth without facing the same repercussions others might. They thrive on the tension between freedom and constraint, creation, and destruction, offering a critique that is both playful and deadly serious.

Just as Erasmus's 'Praise of Folly' uses satire to criticise societal and institutional madness, punk adopts a similarly irreverent stance to expose the absurdity and corruption in the world. Erasmus's work is about the celebration of human folly as a form of truth-telling—foolishness, when examined closely, reveals the underlying madness of authority, religion, and politics. Punk does this too, but through chaos, simplicity, and subversion. Punk's destruction of language reflects a rejection of the systems that control how we communicate, think, and act. In a world of commodified communication and institutional madness, punk embraces the 'folly' of dismantling traditional forms, much like Erasmus's critique of intellectual and moral blindness. Punk's minimalism and rejection of technical sophistication symbolise a rejection of elitist hierarchies, much like 'Praise of Folly' mocks the learnt scholars and hypocritical priests of Erasmus's time. Thus, 'playing the fool' becomes a way of telling the 'awful truth' about the world's dysfunction, doing so through absurdity, aggression, and raw simplicity—challenging power while getting away with it by embracing its own brand of madness. In the words of Carl Jung, 'The soul demands your folly, not your wisdom'. By adapting to the 'stupidity and madness' of the world, 'The Fool' makes its critique more potent, as it speaks from within the chaos it critiques, much like Erasmus's use of folly to highlight deeper truths. The Miscommunication Axiom is—'An increase in population and linguistic complexity can lead to greater misunderstanding and semantic entropy, potentially amplifying confusion and reducing effective communication'.

5. Language of Wisdom and Folly

5.1. Erasmus's Wisdom

No man is wise at all times

In 'Praise of Folly', originally penned in Latin by Desiderius Erasmus in 1509, stands as a masterful satire that spirals through the folly inherent in all aspects of human life. Rooted in the intellectual traditions of the Renaissance, the work critiques the absurdity of human wisdom and the futility of communication, echoing the critique of language. The essay begins with Folly herself delivering a mock encomium, praising her virtues in a tone reminiscent of Lucian's satirical works. As the narrative unfolds, Folly extols self-deception and madness, turning her critique towards the superstitious abuses of Catholic doctrine and the corrupt practices within the Roman Catholic Church. Erasmus, ever the faithful critic, infuses Folly's voice with his disillusionment, especially after his disappointing experience in Rome. The work culminates in a stark declaration of the Christian ideal: 'No Man is wise at all Times, or is without his blind Side'. Erasmus employs classical allusions and a style typical of Renaissance humanists to elevate Folly to a metaphysical level, where she embodies the vitality and absurdity of life itself. She is depicted as a goddess, the progeny of Plutus (the god of wealth) and Youth, nurtured by the nymphs Inebriation and Ignorance. Her companions—self-love, flattery, forgetfulness, laziness, pleasure, dementia, wantonness, intemperance, and heavy sleep—represent the various facets of human folly that, according to Erasmus, make life bearable and even delightful. Folly asserts with pompous confidence that nothing fortunate or frolicsome in life exists without her influence. Erasmus's critique aligns with a broader philosophical commentary on the limitations of human wisdom and language. Erasmus elevates folly to a metaphysical realm, challenging the stoic wisdom of scholasticism, the humanist obsession with learning, and the pursuit of apatheia—a detachment from emotions. For Erasmus, folly is not merely a human weakness but the very essence of life's splendour, love, youth, and the playful, gratuitous aspects of existence. The thesis of Erasmus's satire suggests that foolishness brings happiness and productivity, while excessive wisdom leads to pain, depression, and diminished creativity. In this light, Erasmus critiques the pursuit of knowledge as an exercise in futility, a waste of intellectual effort that only serves to complicate and obscure the simplicity of life. He argues that sciences and learning, which were initially intended to compensate for human deficiencies, have become tools of self-destruction, invented by the 'old devil Theuth' to mislead humanity away from true happiness. Erasmus's disdain for the overvaluation of knowledge and learning reflects a deeper critique of communication itself. He sees the rise of sciences and arts not as advancements but as the pests of mankind, born from the same source as all other evils. In a time when language was unified and communication was straightforward, there was no need for grammar, rhetoric, or laws—tools that have since become instruments of confusion and miscommunication. The golden age of simplicity and directness has been eroded by the complex, convoluted systems of knowledge that now dominate human thought. This critique resonates with the idea of planned obsolescence in language. Just as products are designed to become outdated, language and communication have been manipulated and complicated to the point where they no longer serve their original purpose of conveying truth and understanding. Erasmus's satire reveals how the pursuit of wisdom, far from enlightening humanity, has led to a proliferation of meaningless

information—a waste of intellectual energy that only deepens the folly of human existence. 'In Praise of Folly' is not merely a satirical work but a profound commentary on the limitations of human wisdom, the futility of communication, and the planned obsolescence of language. Erasmus's irony reveals that true wisdom lies not in knowledge or prestige, but in recognising human folly and embracing life's humble joys. Echoing 1 Corinthians 3:18—'Let him become a fool, that he may be wise'—this paradox urges rejection of worldly wisdom to access deeper truths. Satire and absurdity have long exposed power's corruption by defying conventional language. When individuals abandon rationality as defined by authority, they disrupt systems that mask control as truth. By embracing the foolish, they access clarity beyond social norms. What seems irrational becomes the path to authentic understanding, spiritual insight, and freedom from superficial wisdom.

Playing stupid

In the Romantic era, thinkers like William Blake began to reframe stupidity as a potential source of wisdom. Blake's famous assertion that 'if the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise' from 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' reflects a belief that persistence in seemingly foolish actions can eventually lead to deeper understanding. The idea is that through persistence in what seems like foolishness, one can uncover a deeper wisdom. Blake implies that by pushing boundaries, rejecting conventional thinking, and embracing what society might dismiss as folly, an individual can break through the superficial layers of understanding and reach a higher, more authentic truth. In this sense, the fool is not foolish at all but is instead engaged in a process of discovery. By defying norms and persisting in what others might see as irrational or nonsensical, the fool navigates the complexities of life in a way that the so-called wise often cannot. Wisdom, according to Blake, is not found by conforming to the standards of the world but by daring to challenge them. In the end, the fool's journey through folly is transformative, revealing the limitations of conventional wisdom and the richness of deeper insight. The value of stupidity is recognised as essential for reconnecting with aspects of reality that our structured categories often exclude. Embracing stupidity can help us recapture the otherness of difference, breaking free from the confines of conventional thought. On the other hand, the societal impact of stupidity is profound and alarming. Walter B. Pitkin, in his book 'A Short Introduction to the History of Stupidity' (1932), warns of its pervasive and destructive influence. He argues that stupidity is the ultimate social evil, exacerbated by the sheer number of people affected, the concentration of power in the hands of the stupid, and the dangerous combination of high abilities with serious stupidity. In summary, stupidity is not merely a lack of intelligence or ignorance but a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that can manifest as a deliberate resistance to adaptation, a strategic social ploy, or an intellectual strategy. Its impact on society is both pervasive and insidious, challenging our ability to communicate effectively and adapt to new realities. In a world increasingly saturated with information and communication, the critique of stupidity—and the linguistic systems that perpetuate it—remains an urgent task. Stupidity can be a deliberate, informed mentality that is maladaptive action consciously taken against one's rationality. This definition distinguishes stupidity from mere ignorance by emphasising that stupidity involves a choice, not a forced or accidental act and that it actively resists adaptation to added information or circumstances. The phenomenon of 'playing stupid' is another intriguing aspect of this condition. Individuals can deliberately downplay their abilities, lowering others' expectations and evading responsibility. This tactic,

while appearing foolish on the surface, can be a cunning strategy to avoid pressure and obligations, with the 'stupid' individual often performing admirably when truly assessed. The intellectual dimension of stupidity is equally significant. What is often labelled as feeble-mindedness can be a form of pseudo-stupidity, a mental block caused by emotional inhibitions? In this context, people may 'play stupid' in situations where understanding would provoke anxiety or guilt, thereby protecting a fragile psychological equilibrium. Conspicuous stupidity is a kind of shallow display of cleverness that, detached from real-world experience, leads to a superficial and ultimately foolish form of reasoning.

Le leggi della stupidità umana

In his provocative essay[58], 'The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity' ('Le leggi fondamentali della stupidità umana', 1976), Carlo M. Cipolla delves into the intricate and often overlooked domain of human stupidity, offering a stark critique of its pervasive influence. Cipolla articulates five foundational laws that encapsulate the essence of stupidity, underscoring its insidious and omnipresent nature: 1. 'The Inescapable Underestimation': It is a universal and unavoidable truth that individuals consistently underestimate the sheer number of stupid people that exist within any given population. 2. 'The Equality of Stupidity': The likelihood of any individual being stupid is entirely independent of any other characteristic or attribute they may possess, whether it be intelligence, education, or social status. 3. 'The Destructive Nature of Stupidity': A truly stupid person is one who causes harm or loss to another person or group while deriving no benefit themselves and possibly even suffering losses in the process. 4. 'The Peril of Underestimation': Those who are not stupid frequently fail to appreciate the destructive potential of stupid individuals. They forget, to their detriment, that engaging or associating with stupidity invariably results in significant costs, regardless of the context. 5. 'The Supreme Danger of Stupidity': The most dangerous person is, unequivocally, the stupid person, who poses a greater threat than even the most malicious pillager. These laws, particularly the third, illustrate Cipolla's conceptual framework for understanding human behaviour through the lens of benefits and losses. He categorises individuals into four distinct groups based on their impact on themselves and society: - 'Helpless Individuals': These people contribute positively to society but are exploited, often resulting in a net loss for themselves. - 'Intelligent Individuals': They manage to benefit both society and themselves, achieving a balance that leverages their contributions for personal and communal gain. - 'Stupid Individuals': Their actions are counterproductive, harming both themselves and others, leading to a net detriment to society. - 'Bandits': These individuals pursue their self-interest, often at the expense of societal welfare, although the extent of the damage they cause can vary. Cipolla further refines the categories of 'bandits' and 'naive individuals' by considering the net effect of their actions on societal welfare. For example, a bandit may enrich himself to varying degrees while impoverishing society and a naive individual may either contribute positively to society at their own expense or allow themselves to be exploited. Those who are naïve, or 'semi-stupid', engage in behaviours that ultimately result in a net drain on societal welfare. In contrast, some bandits, particularly sociopaths, psychopaths, and those driven by amoral self-interest, act with full awareness of the negative consequences their actions impose on society yet remain indifferent to these outcomes.

[58] Cipolla, C.M. (2011). The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity.

Cipolla's exploration reveals a grim reality: stupidity, as a force within human affairs, is not just a benign flaw but a potent and pervasive danger. It transcends mere ignorance, manifesting as a wilful and often unconscious resistance to adaptation and progress. Through this lens, stupidity becomes not merely a personal failing but a systemic issue, exacerbated by the structures of communication and societal organisation that allow it to proliferate unchecked. Cipolla's analysis of human stupidity suggests that both intelligent individuals and bandits face a unique paradox: the best strategy for survival and success may be to 'play stupid'. For the intelligent, playing stupid can serve as a defence mechanism, allowing them to navigate a world rife with irrationality without drawing attention or provoking conflict. By blending in with the status quo, they avoid the dangers posed by truly stupid individuals, whose destructive potential Cipolla warns against. Similarly, for bandits—those who seek to exploit others for personal gain—pretending to be less aware or capable can serve as a cunning strategy. It allows them to act without arousing suspicion, making it easier to manipulate situations to their advantage while minimising the risk of backlash. Ultimately, in a world where stupidity is both omnipresent and dangerous, blending in with collective miscommunication and confusion may offer a form of protection. In a society where stupidity often holds sway, those who can tactically 'play dumb' can navigate the chaos more effectively, avoiding the direct costs of confronting stupidity head-on. This paradox reinforces Cipolla's central thesis: that stupidity is not merely an individual trait but a pervasive force that shapes human interaction in subtle, often destructive ways. For those aware of its power, playing along may be the wisest, and perhaps the safest, course of action. In the end, it looks like 'if the fool would persist in his folly, he would win any argument'.

Wilful rejection of wisdom

The destiny of those who oppose the power of collective stupidity is often fraught with frustration, isolation, and, in many cases, resistance from the very groups they seek to enlighten. Collective stupidity, as a powerful social force, thrives on conformity, miscommunication, and the suppression of critical thought. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'Letters and Papers from Prison' reveal the nature of stupidity as a far more insidious threat to society than malice. While evil can be confronted, exposed, and resisted, stupidity presents a unique challenge: it is impervious to reason and immune to argument. This concept, rooted in Bonhoeffer's letters from prison[59], serves as a stark warning to any society where certain individuals or groups accumulate excessive power. During the darkest period of German history, when innocent lives were destroyed by incited mobs, Bonhoeffer—a young pastor who boldly spoke out against these atrocities—was ultimately imprisoned. It was there, in the confines of his cell, that he pondered how his once-enlightened nation had descended into a collective of cowards, criminals, and opportunists. His conclusion was unsettling: the root of this transformation was not mere malice, but a pervasive and dangerous stupidity. Bonhoeffer argued that stupidity is not merely an intellectual deficiency but a moral one. It is a condition that infects individuals, not because they lack intelligence, but because they surrender their autonomy and critical thinking in the face of overwhelming power. This surrender creates a society where individuals become conduits for empty slogans and mindless catchphrases, losing their independence and becoming

[59] Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2010). Letters and Papers from Prison. Fortress Press.

instruments of evil without even recognising it. In essence, stupidity is not an inherent trait but a condition that people allow themselves to be subjected to, particularly in the context of social groups or under the influence of political or religious power. Stupidity is a choice, a linguistic affectation. This is not a failure of intellect per se but a failure of will and autonomy, where individuals relinquish their capacity for independent thought in exchange for the comfort of conformity and the illusion of belonging. This condition is exacerbated in large groups, where the complexity of language and the scale of the environment contribute to a collective dumbing down. In such settings, individuals are expected to shed their identities and embrace freedom from responsibility that descends into madness. The crowd, as Bonhoeffer observed, tends to level itself to the lowest common denominator, creating a symphony of folly where stupidity reigns supreme. The creation of a mass society, Bonhoeffer implies, is inherently tied to the propagation of stupidity. In such a society, language becomes a tool not for enlightenment but for maintaining the status quo—an equilibrium of semantic emptiness. Stupidity, in this context, is not a lack of knowledge but a wilful rejection of wisdom, a deliberate choice to remain ignorant. It is a complex, self-perpetuating cycle where education and communication become vehicles for sustaining mediocrity rather than fostering true understanding. Bonhoeffer's insight into the nature of stupidity is a critique of how communication can be weaponised to create and maintain power structures that thrive on the suppression of individual thought. It highlights the planned obsolescence of language, where words are stripped of meaning and used to manipulate rather than to enlighten. In such a world, playing stupid becomes a principle of power, a means to control and manipulate the masses. The tragic irony of Bonhoeffer's life—executed for his involvement in a plot against Hitler—underscores his warning: a society that fails to recognise and resist the dangers of collective stupidity is doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. His words serve as a reminder that true freedom and responsibility lie not in the abandonment of thought, but in the relentless pursuit of wisdom, even in the face of overwhelming stupidity.

Predictably irrational

The phenomenon of mass psychosis[60], where entire populations can become delusional and detached from reality, can be described as a form of collective stupidity. This type of collective madness often stems from extreme fear, manipulation, or propaganda. Mass psychosis can be triggered by a combination of social, political, and psychological factors, often amplified by propaganda and monopoly of media and knowledge production. It emphasises that delusional thinking becomes normalised as the population collectively adopts irrational beliefs, creating a distorted perception of reality. Escaping from this cycle requires a return to reason and critical thinking, as well as the courage to stand against the delusional mainstream narrative. This concept connects to the idea that individuals, when caught in such a psychosis, are not simply ignorant but may consciously choose to embrace falsehoods because it benefits them—whether socially, politically, or economically. In this way, mass psychosis acts like 'societal stupidity' where individuals perform roles and adopt beliefs that serve their interests, even if they are irrational or destructive. When mass communication channels like the corporate media or government-controlled outlets disseminate fear, propaganda, or misleading

[60] www.youtube.com. (n.d.). MASS PSYCHOSIS - How an Entire Population Becomes MENTALLY ILL. [online] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09maaUaRT4M./[Accessed 24 Sep. 2024].

information, they shape a distorted narrative that people begin to accept as reality. This form of miscommunication is not just the spread of ideas; it is a method of conditioning. Repetition of key phrases, slogans, or ideologies through speeches, advertisements, and broadcasts normalises irrational beliefs. Over time, this language creates an echo chamber where alternative views are suppressed, and those who question the dominant narrative are marginalised. In such environments, individuals start to conform not out of belief, but out of fear or the desire to belong. Language, in this context, becomes a tool not for conveying truth, but for reinforcing collective delusion. Much like George Orwell's concept of 'Newspeak' in '1984', the simplification and manipulation of language limits the ability of individuals to think critically or dissent. As a result, a population under mass psychosis speaks and thinks in predetermined, narrow patterns, often detached from reality. In 'Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions', Dan Ariely[61] explores how the irrationality of human decision-making often stems from psychological and social influences, which can be seen as part of a broader 'language of stupidity'. Much like the miscommunications, misunderstandings, and absurdities we experience in everyday language, the decisions people make are often driven by forces that lead to irrational and seemingly 'stupid' outcomes. Ariely's work challenges the classical notion of rational economic behaviour, instead showing that people frequently make irrational decisions based on cognitive biases, emotional reactions, and flawed reasoning. This irrationality is not random but 'predictable'—people tend to make the same errors repeatedly, which speaks to the structured nature of our irrational behaviours. For instance, people behave irrationally when something is offered for free. This mirrors the linguistic absurdity of how people often gravitate toward 'empty' words, or meaningless jargon, just because they seem appealing. Similarly, 'anchoring'—the way people fixate on an initial piece of information, like a price point or a suggested value—can be compared to how individuals latch onto particular words or ideas without critical analysis, leading to misunderstandings or poor decision-making. Ariely also delves into 'social norms' and how they shape irrational behaviours, which can be linked to how language and societal expectations often trap people into patterns of communication that perpetuate confusion or false beliefs. This is akin to the 'stupidity' that arises when people act irrationally simply to conform to group behaviour, much like how language can become nonsensical when driven by social pressures rather than clarity or logic. In short, Ariely's exploration of human decision-making reflects the broader 'language of stupidity' in which irrationality is not just an occasional error, but a predictable and structured part of how humans think and behave. Understanding these forces can help us navigate both our decisions and the ways we communicate, highlighting the intricate connections between irrationality and the complexities of language.

5.2. Power of stupidity

Collective stupidity

Does collective behaviour lead to collective intelligence or stupidity?[62] Are we, as a collective, ensnared in a cycle of stupidity, or is there a path to collective intelligence? This

[61] Ariely, D. (2008). Predictably irrational : the hidden forces that shape our decisions. New York: Harper.

[62] Sainsburywellcome.org. (2021). Understanding how collective behaviour leads to collective intelligence or stupidity | Sainsbury Wellcome Centre. [online] Available at:

question lies at the heart of understanding how group behaviour influences our decisions, for better or worse. Jens Krause, a leading researcher from Humboldt University, Berlin, delves into this paradox in his study of collective behaviour. His insights reveal the dual potential of group dynamics to either elevate or diminish our collective decision-making. Drawing parallels between the synchronised movements of birds in flight or fish in a school, Krause emphasises how our behaviour is often unconsciously swayed by those around us. However, unlike these animals, human collective behaviour does not always lead to intelligence. It can just as easily descend into collective stupidity. When waiting at a crosswalk, we are twice as likely to cross against a red light if someone next to us begins to cross first. This behaviour illustrates how easily collective actions can lead us astray. In this case, the influence of another's poor decision can override our judgment, leading to dangerous and irrational behaviour. Krause's research underscores that collective behaviour has the potential to foster both intelligence and stupidity. In some scenarios, groups can indeed make better decisions than any individual could alone. However, this only holds true under specific conditions: when individuals possess a basic level of understanding, when they are honest in their decision-making, and when there is sufficient diversity in thought to avoid correlated errors. Without these conditions, collective behaviour can amplify errors and lead to disastrous outcomes. In sum, the study of collective behaviour reveals a delicate balance between intelligence and stupidity. While groups have the potential to make smarter decisions than individuals, this potential is contingent upon numerous factors that, if misaligned, can lead to collective folly. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for harnessing the power of collective intelligence while mitigating the risks of collective stupidity. In his essay[63] 'Collective Stupidity', Denny Gioia tackles the paradox of human intelligence—how we, as individuals, are capable of remarkable intellect, yet as a collective, often exhibit staggering folly. This discrepancy is especially glaring when considering our response to climate change, an existential threat that demands urgent and decisive action. Gioia's critique is a sobering reflection on how our collective behaviour has been marked by a profound failure to act, despite overwhelming evidence of the impending crisis. Gioia begins by acknowledging that most rational individuals accept the reality and dangers of climate change. However, he notes a troubling disconnect: while individuals may understand the gravity of the situation, collective action has been woefully inadequate. This gap between individual awareness and collective inaction raises critical questions about why humanity, in the face of such an existential threat, continues to behave so foolishly. One explanation is the persistence of outdated priorities, particularly within the business world. For too long, profit has been the primary concern, often at the expense of the planet's well-being. Even as environmental issues have gained prominence, many firms continue to prioritise short-term gains over long-term sustainability. This narrow focus on profit is a form of collective stupidity that blinds us to the urgent need for action. Another factor contributing to this collective stupidity is the deliberate dissemination of misinformation by powerful industries. All industries have adopted similar tactics, sowing doubt, and confusion about the reality to protect their interests. This calculated obfuscation undermines public understanding and delays necessary action, further entrenching collective inaction. It looks like there is a human tendency to avoid difficult truths and resist

https://www.sainsburywellcome.org/web/qa/understanding-how-collective-behaviour-leads-collective-intelligence-or-stupidity [Accessed 25 Aug. 2024].

[63] Gioia, D. (2023). Collective Stupidity. Journal of Management Inquiry, 33(1), pp.92–93. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/10564926231203846.

change. People are more inclined to dismiss slow-moving threats, like climate change, because they do not trigger immediate responses. This psychological inertia, coupled with corporate distractions and 'whataboutism', leads to a dangerous complacency that perpetuates the status quo. The irony of human intelligence is that the most advanced species on Earth individually, are capable of repeatedly committing catastrophic errors collectively. Eventually people face the consequences of their failure to act wisely collectively, paying a steep price individually.

Why do smart people do stupid things in big groups?

How does collective stupidity work? Why do smart people do stupid things in groups? Why functional stupidity can cause organisational collapse, financial meltdown, and technical disaster? 'The Stupidity Paradox: The Power and Pitfalls of Functional Stupidity at Work'[64] by Mats Alvesson and André Spicer delves into a profound and often overlooked phenomenon within organisational life—functional stupidity. This concept explores how, within the intricate dance of corporate operations, seemingly intelligent individuals and organisations can engage in irrational and nonsensical behaviours that, while potentially beneficial in the short term, often lead to disastrous long-term consequences. The paradox of stupidity in the workplace lies in its dual nature. On one hand, a certain degree of functional stupidity can foster workplace harmony, streamline processes, and drive short-term success. It allows individuals to focus on their tasks without questioning the purpose or potential consequences, thus avoiding conflict, and promoting a smooth operational flow. However, this same ignorance, when left unchecked, can result in organisational collapse, financial ruin, and technological failures. This paradox is pervasive, influencing everything from the blind adoption of management fads to an overemphasis on superficial aspects like brand image. The book challenges the reader to question the 'knowledge economy' myth—an idea that many organisations claim to be knowledge-intensive, yet their employees are often relegated to mundane, repetitive tasks. This disconnection between perception and reality highlights the superficiality that often underpins corporate practices. The dangers of mindless expertise arise when highly skilled professionals carry out their tasks on autopilot, lacking any engagement in critical thinking. This 'skilled incompetence' can lead to stagnation, as individuals become resistant to change and latest ideas, preferring the comfort of routine over the challenge of innovation. In his essay[65] on stupidity, Robert Musil argues that in order to comment on stupidity, one must not be stupid: '...the best place might be with the initial difficulty, which is that anyone who wants to talk about stupidity, or profitably participate in a conversation about it, must assume about himself that he is not stupid; and he also makes a show of considering himself clever, although doing so is generally considered a sign of stupidity!' To comment on stupidity without embodying it is a paradoxical endeavour. To discuss stupidity presupposes intelligence, yet claiming intelligence risks lapsing into the very stupidity one critiques. This paradox suggests that stupidity is not merely an intellectual deficit but a complex social phenomenon that defies straightforward analysis. Stupidity, as Musil implies, often exists as the Other—a perceived threat to the intelligent, yet

[64] Mats Alvesson (2016). The Stupidity Paradox : Why Smart People Don’t Think at Work. London: Profile Books.

[65] Robert Musil (2019). On Stupidity (translated from the German). [online] PN Review Blog. Available at: https://pnreviewblog.wordpress.com/2019/10/21/on-stupidity-by-robert-musil-translated-from-the-german/ [Accessed 24 Sep. 2024].

one that remains inscrutable and untouchable due to its inherent contradiction. Intelligence, in its quest to outmanoeuvre stupidity, may find itself ensnared by it, revealing that the true nature of stupidity is elusive and perhaps more powerful than we care to admit. In his exploration of stupidity, Musil candidly admits to a lack of a definitive theory that could potentially offer salvation to the world. Unlike goodness, beauty, or electricity—concepts that have long captured the intellectual pursuit—stupidity remains curiously neglected within the annals of scientific inquiry. Musil's approach to stupidity is not scientific but observational, grounded in everyday language and its unpredictable usage. He compares the task to a lepidopterist's nightmare—just as one identifies a specimen, another confusingly similar one appears. Words related to stupidity resist clear classification, suggesting that their links may be more illusion than essence. Musil highlights the paradox of discussing stupidity: assuming one is not stupid is itself suspect. Often, pretending to be foolish becomes a survival tactic, especially in power imbalances. Feigned stupidity can disarm the powerful, making it a subtle tool of resistance, manipulation, and social navigation.

Language consists of flawed concepts

Is it possible that the myth of intelligence is damaging, asks[66] Jordan De Silva in 'Why 'intelligence' is a stupid concept' (2017). Have you ever doubted your intelligence, thinking it might be the reason you cannot achieve what others have? Research increasingly shows that our attitudes toward intelligence play a crucial role in our ability to reach our goals. One of the most pervasive myths is that the most successful individuals are inherently the most intelligent. This belief is not only misleading but also detrimental to personal growth. Many people fall back on the idea that failure is proof of a lack of intelligence, reinforcing the notion that they are not the smartest in the room. This perspective overlooks the reality that the stereotypical 'intelligent person' often succeeds by persistently pushing through repeated failures. These individuals learn from their mistakes, adjusting their strategies until they achieve their desired outcomes. True intelligence, if it exists in any meaningful way, might be better understood as a particular attitude towards failure—seeing it as a valuable opportunity for reflection, learning, and renewed effort rather than a definitive endpoint. One of the most problematic aspects of modern education is its arbitrary division between 'intelligent' and 'non-intelligent' students. From an early age, we are led to believe that top performers are naturally gifted, and born with superior intelligence. However, this belief is a fallacy. High achievers often put in more effort or have developed more effective study habits. Some of the significant predictors of long-term academic success are motivation and study strategies, not inherent intelligence. This highlights the importance of recognising the limitations of the traditional concept of intelligence. The notion of intelligence is fundamentally arbitrary. What does it truly mean to be intelligent? Intelligence can encompass a variety of traits, such as quick learning, critical thinking, creativity, wit, academic performance, and articulation. Interestingly, most people considered 'intelligent' likely possess only one or two of these qualities, not all. This suggests that intelligence is not a monolithic trait but rather a collection of various abilities, each of which

[66] Jordan De Silva (2017). Why 'intelligence' is a stupid concept - Mission.org - Medium. [online] Medium. Available at: https://medium.com/the-mission/why-intelligence-is-a-stupid-concept-ed54d22d9084 [Accessed 24 Aug. 2024].

can be developed to some extent in everyone. Having deconstructed the idea of intelligence into specific characteristics, it becomes clear that no single, overarching concept of intelligence is responsible for success in studies or work. Environmental factors such as culture and upbringing influence IQ scores, making traditional measures of intelligence a poor reflection of innate intellectual abilities. Academic success, therefore, may stem more from learnt behaviours and strategies than from inherent gifts. People who see intelligence as a fixed trait are less likely to challenge themselves and take on difficult tasks, fearing failure. However, studies show that those who believe intelligence is malleable are more likely to improve over time. Interestingly, individuals who are labelled as 'gifted' or 'smart' from a youthful age often avoid challenging situations to protect their reputation, a phenomenon known as the 'big fish, small pond' effect. They fear public failure, which they equate with a public questioning of their intelligence. As a result, they limit themselves to less challenging environments where their intelligence goes untested. Modern measures of intelligence struggle to differentiate between inherent and acquired traits, leading to a flawed understanding of what it means to be smart. The most important lesson is to view intelligence as something malleable and capable of growth. By adopting this mindset, you are more likely to embrace challenges, step outside your comfort zone, and see failure not as a setback but as a necessary part of the learning journey. The exploration of stupidity across various contexts—from functional stupidity in organisations to the philosophical critiques of intelligence—reveals a common thread: stupidity is not merely an individual failing but a collective phenomenon that emerges and amplifies within large, complex linguistic groups. As these groups grow and their communication becomes more intricate, the potential for miscommunication, semantic entropy, and collective stupidity increases. Stupidity, as analysed, often arises from the disconnect between individual cognitive capacities and the pressures of collective behaviour. In large groups, the complexity of language and the proliferation of communication channels lead to a degradation of meaning, where the clarity and precision of ideas become diluted. This semantic entropy fosters environments where thoughtless conformity, misinterpretation, and the failure to critically engage with information thrive. The Miscommunication Axiom -'As populations grow and linguistic systems become more complex, misunderstanding and semantic entropy tend to rise, amplifying confusion and weakening effective communication'.—captures this dynamic.

Theory of stupidity

What would a theory of collective stupidity look like? In 2004 Geoff Mulgan answered in his 'Lemmings, Laziness, and Likes: A Theory of Collective Stupidity[67]'. Collective intelligence is the amplified capability arising from the constructive collaboration of individual minds, shaping the entirety of human civilisation. Left to our own devices, our lives would likely be solitary and brief. However, this collective intelligence can also manifest in smaller contexts and can be quantified when groups solve problems more effectively than isolated individuals. Conversely, collective stupidity occurs when the aggregation of individual bits of intelligence results in poorer outcomes than if those individuals acted alone. This phenomenon

[67] Geoff Mulgan (2024). A theory of collective stupidity: laziness, likes and lemmings. [online]. Available at: https://www.geoffmulgan.com/post/a-theory-of-collective-stupidity-laziness-likes-and-lemmings [Accessed 25 Aug. 2024].

is particularly evident when the self-interests of individuals culminate in detrimental collective outcomes, such as the 'tragedy of the commons'. Understanding collective stupidity requires dissecting the failures in collective intelligence. Just as individual stupidity arises from errors in observation, interpretation, memory, or judgment, so too can collective stupidity. These failures can be observed in any group, organisation, or society, where critical elements of intelligence, such as creativity, empathy, and wisdom, are imbalanced or ineffective. Collective stupidity often stems from an imbalance in the components of intelligence. For instance, an overemphasis on data collection without proper interpretation can lead to poor judgment. Similarly, clinging to outdated memories or models can result in catastrophic errors. These failures at the collective level mirror individual cognitive failures, where maintaining a balance between the elements of intelligence is crucial for effective action. A more profound cause of collective stupidity lies in the inability to establish and utilise learning loops—systems that recognise and adapt to new environments by revising cognitive frameworks. Collective stupidity emerges when errors go uncorrected, often due to weak feedback mechanisms. The persistence of collective stupidity can be attributed to several forces that obstruct error correction and adaptation. Two primary drivers of collective stupidity are the tendency to conserve cognitive energy and to seek positive social feedback. Intelligence requires significant energy and attention, leading us to default to easier, less taxing cognitive shortcuts. This conservation of energy manifests in routine behaviours that, while efficient for everyday tasks, hinder deeper, more reflective thinking necessary for complex problem-solving. Evolution has ingrained in us a strong tendency to form and commit to groups. However, this commitment can lead to collective stupidity when loyalty overrides critical thinking, suppressing necessary observation, interpretation, and judgment. Groups often develop strong identities that foster cooperation but can also blind them to reality. These identities, reinforced by symbols, rituals, and narratives, can outlast their usefulness and obstruct accurate perception and decision-making. Human suggestibility, while useful for learning and cooperation, can amplify errors in group settings. This tendency leads to bandwagon effects, where shared errors spread rapidly, creating collective delusions or panics. History is replete with examples of nations engaging in self-destructive behaviours—driven by groupthink, conformity, and an inability to process complex dynamics—that lead to national decline or collapse. Conformism, driven by the need for group coherence, often suppresses critical information and divergent thinking. This leads to collective blind spots, where groups fail to recognise or address significant errors. In essence, collective stupidity and the planned obsolescence of language are natural phenomena within large social groups. As language and communication become more complex, the potential for miscommunication and semantic entropy increases. However, these dynamics are not inherently negative; rather, they reflect the natural evolution of social and cognitive processes. By recognising and addressing the factors that contribute to collective stupidity, we can better harness the power of collective intelligence for the benefit of society.

5.3. Babbling Ape

Talking gorilla?

Koko the Talking Gorilla became a global sensation, largely due to her apparent ability to communicate using American Sign Language (ASL), sparking debates and emotional connections around the possibility of interspecies communication. Over the decades, Koko

appeared in documentaries, books, and interviews, fuelling the belief that she could express thoughts, emotions, and desires through signs, elevating her to a symbol of animal intelligence. The 1978 documentary 'Koko: A Talking Gorilla' captured this, portraying her as a breakthrough in understanding animal cognition. However, the scientific perspective on Koko and other apes trained in sign language, such as Nim Chimpsky, has shifted dramatically. Critics argue that rather than engaging in genuine, creative language use, these apes were largely mimicking human handlers, responding to subtle cues rather than forming original thoughts. Herbert Terrace, one of the most prominent critics, concluded that much of what was perceived as language in these apes was behaviour driven by conditioning. The signs Koko used were often requests for food, affection, or basic needs, not the complex, spontaneous communication we associate with human language. Herbert S. Terrace, a prominent critic of ape language studies, argued that Koko's apparent ability to use sign language was not as meaningful as many believed. In his article[68] 'Why Koko Can't Talk: The Ape's Still Fooling Most of the People, Most of the Time', Terrace contends that Koko and other apes were not genuinely communicating through language but rather mimicking their handlers in exchange for rewards. According to Terrace, these apes were responding to subtle cues from their trainers rather than forming original, complex thoughts, which would suggest true linguistic ability. Terrace's scepticism is rooted in the idea that while Koko could use signs to make requests, such as asking for food or attention, these interactions were largely non-grammatical and lacked the creativity and structure seen in human language. Much of Koko's behaviour, Terrace and others argued, was misinterpreted by well-meaning researchers who projected human traits onto the gorilla. Despite the emotional connection that Koko's story fostered around the world, particularly with her bonding moments like adopting a kitten, the scientific consensus has shifted toward the view that Koko's communication was not as groundbreaking as initially thought. It was more likely a result of conditioning rather than evidence of true linguistic comprehension. The reason apes, like Koko, are 'fooling most of the people, most of the time' lies less in the apes' abilities and more in human psychology—specifically, our deep desire to believe in animal intelligence and connection. As Herbert Terrace and other critics argue, the emotional appeal of projects like Koko's creates a powerful narrative: humans want to believe that animals, especially primates, can communicate in ways that mirror human language and emotion. This desire taps into a fundamental longing for connection across species, reflecting a broader human tendency to project intelligence, empathy, and other human traits onto animals. One key factor is anthropomorphism, the practice of attributing human characteristics to non-human entities. People are naturally inclined to see human-like behaviour in animals, and the idea that animals can express themselves using human language is particularly compelling. Koko, for example, seemed to demonstrate emotions like affection and sadness, and her use of sign language, however simplistic, gave many the impression that she was communicating on a deeper level. These narratives are not only heartwarming but also affirm our desire to see ourselves in the natural world, blurring the lines between human and animal intelligence. Much of this belief stems from dreaming and a tendency to misinterpret the apes' conditioned responses as genuine linguistic communication. Rather than true language, what

[68] Terrace, Herbert S (n.d.) Why Koko can't talk: The ape's still fooling most of the people, most of the time. The Sciences. [Online] 22 (9), 8–10.

we often see in apes like Koko are highly trained behaviours, driven by rewards and guided by subtle cues from their handlers. In the end, people are 'fooled' not because apes are tricking them intentionally, but because humans want to be fooled. The emotional and symbolic significance of bridging the gap between humans and animals leads many to overlook the scientific limitations of these studies, focusing instead on the heartwarming moments that reinforce our desire for connection.

Conversation with imposter

A 2015 article[69] from The Atlantic is called 'A Conversation With Koko the Gorilla, An Afternoon Spent with the Famous Gorilla Who Knows Sign Language', and the scientist who taught her how to 'Talk'. The quote from the end of the article: 'Allegations of selective interpretation have accompanied ape-language research from the beginning. Still, it was impossible to be there interacting with her, and not feel that I was in the presence of another self-conscious being.' This captures the profound emotional impact Koko had on those who interacted with her. Despite the scientific scepticism surrounding her ability to truly use language in the human sense, Koko's interactions often left people feeling that they were in the presence of an intelligent, self-aware being. It reveals how deeply humans seek to recognise themselves in other creatures and how powerful those moments of apparent understanding can be, regardless of the scientific outcome. The 2022 article[70] 'Koko the Impostor: Ape Sign Language Was a Bunch of Babbling Nonsense' reinforces this scepticism. It suggests that the belief in Koko's linguistic abilities was based more on human projection and a desire to see animals as capable of human-like communication than on rigorous scientific evidence. Researchers found that the grammar and structure of Koko's 'conversations' were inconsistent, and much of the interpretation was generous or selective. While her ability to use signs was remarkable in some respects, it was far from proof of language use as we understand it. The study of ape sign language, once seen as groundbreaking, is now largely discredited, with critics arguing that apes were simply mimicking their handlers rather than engaging in meaningful communication. Apes like Koko and Nim Chimpsky appeared to sign words and phrases, but a closer analysis revealed that their actions were more about imitating human gestures than expressing original thoughts. Researchers discovered that apes were often responding to subtle human cues, leading to overly generous interpretations of their behaviour. Many of the 'conversations' were non-grammatical and consisted mostly of requests for food or affection, not complex or creative thoughts. While the idea of animals communicating in human language is emotionally appealing, the reality is more complex. Despite heartwarming anecdotes, evidence suggests that apes were not forming sentences or engaging in true language. Instead, much of their behaviour was cherry-picked and over-interpreted. The study of ape sign language has largely fallen out of favour in the scientific community, viewed now as more of an experiment in human-animal interaction than in animal communication. What was once

[69] Roc Morin (2015). What Koko the Sign-Language-Speaking Gorilla Can Teach Us About Being Human. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/08/koko-the-talking-gorilla-sign-language-francine-patterson/402307/.

[70] Hartsfield, T. (2022). Koko the Impostor: Ape sign language was a bunch of babbling nonsense. [online] Big Think. Available at: https://bigthink.com/life/ape-sign-language/.

celebrated as groundbreaking is now reinterpreted as a form of babbling—fascinating but far from the linguistic breakthrough once imagined. In the end, the story of Koko reflects not only the limitations of animal communication but also the complexity of human hopes and the tendency to understand the nature of language. It seems like the mere desire to communicate is seen as a form of intelligence, though it might not align with conventional definitions of cognitive intelligence, which often emphasise problem-solving, abstract thinking, or language-based reasoning. In the context of animals like Koko the gorilla, the desire to communicate—even if it does not meet the linguistic standards of human language—demonstrates a level of social intelligence. It shows an awareness of others and a need to bridge understanding. Even though Koko's signing may not have been a full linguistic expression, her willingness to use signs to express basic desires, emotions, and intentions highlights a fundamental aspect of intelligence: the drive to interact and relate with others in meaningful ways. Communication, whether through gestures, vocalisations, or other means, often indicates that an individual can recognise the existence of others and understand the importance of connection. In this sense, the desire to communicate is an adaptive form of intelligence, deeply tied to survival and social dynamics, whether in humans or animals. What is the difference between the Babbling Gorilla using language for food and attention, and the hundreds of authors who wrote thousands of articles about Koko the Talking Gorilla just for profit and popularity? Is it the way we use language as a tool that really separates us humans from apes and machines? What if some humans are using language like Koko the Imposter?

Babbling man

Communication is not a perfect or flawless transmission of ideas; rather, it is often messy and fraught with errors, ambiguities, and emotional complexities. It seems obvious that the communication process inevitably includes elements like miscommunication, misunderstanding, absurdity, and even madness or nonsense as integral parts of the broader desire to communicate. This imperfection is what makes communication a deeply human (and sometimes animal) endeavour, driven by the need to connect despite these inherent obstacles. Maybe the difference between Koko the Imposter and The Babbling Man is not so far? Humans and animals are predictably irrational. Miscommunication and misunderstanding are natural byproducts of the communication process. People often interpret messages based on their own experiences, biases, and cultural contexts, leading to gaps in understanding. Absurdity and nonsense can arise when language or signals fail to align with the intended meaning, yet even these moments of confusion are part of the ongoing effort to make meaning. These breakdowns can sometimes lead to new forms of understanding or creativity, as individuals adapt, clarify, or reframe their messages. Stupidity and madness—often seen as failures of logic or reason—also play a role. These elements highlight the emotional and irrational dimensions of communication. For instance, emotional responses, impulsive reactions, or socially conditioned behaviours can sometimes override logical dialogue, but they are still expressions of the desire to engage with others, even when they seem irrational. Ultimately, communication is a dynamic and complex process that reflects the full range of human (and sometimes animal) experiences. The presence of miscommunication, absurdity, and even nonsense does not diminish the value of communication; rather, it underscores the depth of the desire to connect despite the barriers that arise. These imperfections make communication a living, evolving process rather than a static exchange of information. The cultural hero is often in a situation of a communication

breakdown. The figure of the 'fool' holds significant importance in the myths and narratives of civilisation, both in ancient and modern times. This archetype of the wise fool continues to resonate in films like 'Being There'(1979) and 'Forrest Gump'(1994). The 'fool' often represents an outsider, someone perceived as lacking conventional intelligence or social awareness, yet their simplicity and innocence allow them to navigate the world in ways that reveal deeper truths about society, human nature, and the absurdities of power. In traditional myths and folklore, the fool plays a pivotal role as a truth-teller or a disruptor, often unburdened by the complexities of logic, status, or ambition. In 'Being There', Chance the Gardener becomes an influential figure despite his lack of education or awareness of the world beyond gardening. His simple, almost nonsensical statements are interpreted by those around him as profound, reflecting how society often projects meaning onto figures that seem wise but are, in fact, detached from deeper understanding. His 'foolishness' allows him to navigate the highest circles of power with ease, showing how absurdity and miscommunication can lead to influence and status in certain contexts. Similarly, Forrest Gump presents a character whose perceived limitations in intelligence allow him to move through life with remarkable success, largely because he approaches situations with sincerity, openness, and a lack of cynicism. Forrest's simplistic view of the world enables him to participate in major historical events and develop meaningful relationships without being bogged down by the complexities and struggles others face. His naivety gives him a kind of wisdom—rooted in kindness and perseverance—that allows him to thrive in an otherwise chaotic and unpredictable world. In both cases, these modern 'fools' subvert traditional expectations of intelligence, offering a critique of societal structures and norms. They reveal that intelligence is not always what it seems, and that wisdom can come from unexpected places. Their stories highlight how absurdity, miscommunication, and simplicity can lead to deeper truths, reinforcing the ancient archetype of the fool as a figure who disrupts and enlightens. Thus, the fool remains a powerful truth-telling figure in culture, showing that beneath their apparent madness or simplicity lies an alternative form of wisdom that exposes the contradictions, absurdities, and follies of society.

Fear of stupidity

In 'Who is Afraid of Stupidity?'[71] Yonathan Listik posits that the fear of stupidity is a fear reserved for the intelligent—those who recognise its destructive potential. Stupidity, unlike malice, is often unintentional, a byproduct of ignorance rather than a deliberate act of harm. This distinction is crucial, for while malice can be confronted and resisted, stupidity remains an insidious force, unyielding to reason and logic. However, this fear is not necessarily grounded. When we examine historical atrocities like colonialism and eugenics, it becomes evident that these were not the products of stupidity but rather of a cold, calculated intelligence. The so-called progress of civilisation has often been driven by a form of intelligence that rationalises and justifies domination, violence, and dehumanisation under the guise of order and reason. Intelligence, in its pursuit of totalising knowledge and control, has been complicit in some of the darkest chapters of human history. The experiments of various economic policies with disastrous results are all examples of intelligence being wielded as a tool of oppression. These are not accidents of history; they are the logical outcomes of a civilisation that equates

[71] Listik, Yonathan(2021) Who is afraid of Stupidity? Available at: https://www.philosophie.ch/attachment/374/download/Listik-paper+docx [Accessed 25 Aug. 2024].

intelligence with superiority and progress with domination. The narrative of progress, upheld by intelligence and reason, is often a veneer for systemic violence and control. The very constructs of rationality, agency, and citizenship are not objective truths but are instead products of a disciplinary regime that naturalises and perpetuates inequality and oppression. Given this historical context, the question arises: why are we so afraid of stupidity? If intelligence has led us to such destructive ends, might stupidity offer an alternative? This is not to suggest that we should embrace ignorance, but rather that we should critically examine the assumptions and values that underpin our worship of intelligence. The concept of intelligence, as it is commonly understood, often serves to reinforce existing power structures. Those who deviate from the dominant narrative—whether they are labelled as stupid, irrational, or uneducated—are marginalised and silenced. Yet, as history has shown, the 'intelligent' actions of those in power have often led to far greater harm than the so-called stupidity of the masses. In this light, perhaps we should not be so quick to dismiss stupidity. It may be that what we label as stupidity is simply a refusal to conform to the logic of domination and control. If intelligence is the driving force behind a civilisation that perpetuates violence and inequality, then perhaps it is time to reconsider the value of stupidity—not as a lack of intelligence, but as a resistance to the destructive logic of progress. The political implications of this are significant. The desire to govern, to impose order and rationality, is inherently violent because it is always already a desire to dominate those who are deemed incapable of self-governance. In this sense, the fear of stupidity is a fear of losing control, of disrupting the established order. But perhaps this disruption is exactly what is needed. If civilisation, as it is currently constructed, is defined by domination and violence, then embracing stupidity—however counterintuitive it may seem—could be a way to subvert that order. This is not a call to abandon intelligence but to critically interrogate the assumptions and values that underlie it. The imperative to be intelligent, to always seek the 'best' and most 'rational' solutions, may be leading us down a path of destruction. By challenging this imperative, we open the possibility for alternative ways of thinking and being—ways that do not necessarily conform to the logic of domination and control. In conclusion, the collective phenomenon of stupidity, when viewed through the lens of language and communication, suggests that as societies grow and their languages become more complex, the potential for miscommunication and semantic entropy increases. This is not inherently negative; rather, it is a natural byproduct of social and linguistic evolution. By recognising the limitations of intelligence and the potential value of what we dismiss as stupidity, we may begin to imagine new possibilities for a more just and equitable world.

'In Praise of Obsolescence'

(In the style of Erasmus)

Hail, O folly of words! I come to sing your praises in this age of endless verbosity, where the currency of language is minted not in the purity of meaning, but in the sheer abundance of words. How delightful it is to see that the creators of language—those noble writers, tireless media, industrious publishers, cunning politicians, and learnt institutions—have mastered the art of making language itself disposable! For what value is there in plain speaking and clear understanding when there is profit to be had in the ceaseless churn of linguistic excess? Consider the scholars, who once were guardians of wisdom. Now, they labour not for the pursuit of truth, but to produce volume. The academic presses overflow with books and journals, each more esoteric than the last, each more fleeting in its relevance. In their hands, language is not a

tool for clarity, but a commodity to be repackaged and sold anew with each passing season. The pursuit of knowledge has become the pursuit of novelty, and in this, dear folly, they have become your most loyal servants. The media, too, have embraced your doctrine with fervour. News is no longer about informing the public, but about filling the airwaves and screens with a torrent of words. The content must be endless, the cycle unbroken, for the true value lies not in the message, but in the constant, unrelenting production of language. Whether understood or not, whether meaningful or not, the words must flow, for it is in their sheer quantity that the profit lies. Publishers, once the gatekeepers of literary merit, now thrive on this planned obsolescence. They know well that a timeless book is a book that cannot be sold again. And so, they encourage the creation of works that will quickly fade, to be replaced by the next wave of linguistic products. How splendid it is that they have turned language into a consumable, where the value is found not in what is said, but in how quickly it can be forgotten, and how soon it can be replaced. Politicians, ever the clever strategists, have also learnt your ways. They speak not to be understood, but to obfuscate, to cloud the minds of the masses with an ever-shifting array of slogans, buzzwords, and empty rhetoric. For in confusion lies power, and in the constant reinvention of language, they maintain their control. They craft speeches that are destined to be obsolete before the ink is dry, for a language that is stable and clear is a language that does not serve their ends. Even the institutions of education, where one might hope for refuge from this madness, have succumbed. They teach not the enduring principles of clear thought and expression, but the ever-changing lexicon of the day. Students are trained not to communicate with clarity, but to navigate the labyrinth of jargon that is constantly being constructed and deconstructed. They are prepared not for a life of understanding, but for a life of constant linguistic consumption, where the goal is not to say something worth saying, but to say something new. And so, O folly, you reign supreme in this world of planned obsolescence. Language, once the means of human connection and understanding, has become a tool for profit and power. We are no longer concerned with the truth of our words, but with their quantity, with their marketability, with their ability to generate more language. We are lost in a sea of words, adrift on a tide of endless, meaningless language, and it is you, folly, who have led us here. But let us not despair, for in this grand spectacle of obsolescence, there is a kind of beauty, a kind of twisted genius. After all, what could be more fitting for a world so obsessed with progress, so enamoured with the new, than to make language itself a victim of planned obsolescence? And so, let us praise this folly, this absurdity, for it is the truest reflection of the age in which we live. Hail to the entropy of endless words! Hail to the language that is here today and gone tomorrow! The conspiracy of speech that it is made to break. The falling tower of babble. Hail to the folly of obsolescence!

Introduction to Vol.I: THE CONSPIRACY OF SPEECH

'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness'.

— Samuel Beckett

'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

'Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality'.

— Joseph Conrad

'Language is the most imperfect and expensive means yet discovered for communicating thought'.

— William James

'I carry the corpses of three dead languages in every word I use'.

— Fritz Mauthner

1. The Language Crisis

On Mauthner's shoulders

Fritz Mauthner's 'Contributions to a Critique of Language' (Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache, 1901) was largely dismissed by his peers, leaving him disillusioned and weary of journalism as a 'a trade with words' (Worthandel). He argued that every philosophical problem is really a problem of language, and that true insight requires not reforming our words but dismantling them as instruments of knowledge. This loss of faith in speech finds an echo in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1902 'Lord Chandos Letter', where the narrator abandons all attempts at coherent expression and resolves to write no more. The refusal to use language as an end point of wisdom and a highest point of human life can be find in Tao Te Ching. What can be spoken is not the unchanging way of nature. The name that can be named is not eternal. What is without a name is the endless source of everything. What has a name gives rise to all things in the transient world. Because all things are temporary. Naming all things is pointless. Human language is just a tool and has its limits. Full complexity of life cannot be named. Knowledge of life must transcend the limits of language. At Vienna's fin de siècle, Mauthner influenced thinkers like Ernst Mach and Ludwig Wittgenstein, but remained convinced that even logical analysis is doomed. Because logic itself is just another language. He warned of a collective 'word superstition' (wortaberglaube) that treats words as fetishes and pseudo-concepts. People use these ready-made slogans and phrases forgetting that meaning lives only in our remembered use of language as personal interaction. Abstract grammar and vocabulary, Mauthner held, negate the richness of sensory experience. In his sceptical nominalism, epistemology becomes the critique of language: an endless task of tearing down each rung of the linguistic ladder until nothing remains but the raw material of thought itself. Not abstract thoughts of non-existing entities but concrete thoughts of personal interaction between people and physical experience with nature. Mauthner's radical rejection of speech challenges his followers to demolish the very structures that shape our understanding—a true critique of language that seeks freedom beyond words. Because all things and words are temporary and transient. In the words of Lao

Tzu: 'To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day'. True knowledge of life lies in the tendencies not the facts.

Mauthner argued that every piece of so-called knowledge is merely a tautology rehearsing what we already sense, since all words originate in our observations of the external world, including our own bodies. He held that mind and body are themselves linguistic constructs, and that psychology can never escape this circle. Thinking then is just a silent speaking, and any attempt to describe an inner language collapses into words borrowed from physical experience. Language, in his view, is an inherently imprecise, temporary tool whose logic cannot transcend its own structures. By exposing the gap between words and reality, Mauthner radicalised scepticism: no statement can convey new truth, and every abstract concept only reflects our habitual use of terms. Every eloquent analysis is just another form of temporary borrowing meanings from our experience and thus equally doomed to failure. His famous injunction—to dismantle language rung by rung—challenges us to abandon the illusion that words can fully capture existence. When we say 'I exist', we make a linguistic claim, not proof, and we can just as easily imagine the non-existent without creating it. Once one recognise 'the limits of his own language', he must also accept that those limits are self-imposed and that true understanding begins where his words run out.

In 'Mauthner's Critique of Language' Gershon Weiler insists that Ludwig Wittgenstein stands on Fritz Mauthner's shoulders: without Mauthner there would be no later turn to language's limits. Wittgenstein's Vienna or Fin-de-siècle Vienna became a proving ground for world-shaking critique, as Loos, Mach, Klimt, Mahler, Freud, Musil, and Karl Kraus joined a radical reassessment of art, society and thought under the fading Habsburg allodial order. Fritz Mauthner's apocalyptic essays in the Berliner Tageblatt sparked a movement of Sprachskepsis, exposing language's corruption and its ever-widening gap from lived reality. Language scepticism has spread and reflected the zeitgeist in Europe. Joyce and Beckett, reading Mauthner together, turned to primitive directness and the silence between phrases, while Proust lamented that experience remains hermetic even when memory tries to recapture it. Balzac's unpublished 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women' mocked mechanistic characterisations, and every writer in Vienna grappled with the tyranny of words—vowing to climb the ladder of language only to shatter each rung beneath them. Robert Musil's 'Posthumous Papers of a Living Author' not only examines modernity's crushing effect on the individual but also records various forms of decline he witnessed in the ferment of fin de siècle Vienna. At a time when the Ringstraße cafés hosted debates on psychoanalysis, music, and philosophy, Musil perceived language itself slipping into banality. Echoing idea that words often stand for nothing but themselves, Musil mocks the clichés plastered on postcards and laments how statues serve merely as waymarks. Monuments that do not stir the imagination bearing sterile inscriptions of name and date. Musil's unease resonates with Ludwig Wittgenstein's later insistence that meaning arises only through use: when language becomes a series of empty sign-vehicles, the magic of lived experience leaks away. Mauthner's warning is that lofty terms and abstractions detach us from physical experience of life. For example the word harmony(n.) meaning 'combination of tones pleasing to the ear; concord of sounds', or 'agreement, accord, harmonious relations' and 'settled government, order', but also literally 'means of joining', used of ship-planks, etc., also related to 'harmos' -'fastenings of a door; joint, shoulder', from PIE root *ar- 'to fit together'. How come the concrete physical objects of ship-planks and fastenings of a door became abstract ideas of concord of sounds, harmonious relations, and agreement of feeling? Does harmony exist in the physical world or is it only a word that stands for nothing? The

scientific optimism—its faith in quantification and psychoanalytic categorisation—turns everyday speech into technical jargon. Robert Musil sensed the danger of an overly abstract scientific worldview. Musil's essays map the collapse of language and culture in the twilight of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, reflecting Mauthner's scepticism about empty words and anticipating Wittgenstein's philosophy of meaning as use. They all understood that critique alone cannot free people: language is alive in our minds, an act that binds thought even as it makes thought possible, and the task is to face the unknown experience that lies beyond every utterance. This shared confrontation with language's limits became the birthplace of a philosophy that seeks its ultimate home not in words but in the silence that follows.

In 'James Joyce and Fritz Mauthner: Multilingual Liberators of Language'[72] Maria Kager argues that both Fritz Mauthner and James Joyce sought to transgress language's confines, holding silence as the ultimate ideal. Mauthner extended his critique to its furthest limits, declaring language worthless as a path to knowledge—merely poetry, propaganda, and the seedbed of new dogmas. He confessed to carrying 'the corpses of three languages'(German, Czech and Hebrew) in every word he used, warning that most people, enchanted by an arbitrary code, remain trapped by the illusion of objective truth. Liberation, he insisted, demands not reform but destruction. thinkers must tear down each rung of the linguistic ladder, replacing words with memories as pure experience. Joyce embraced this destructive mission in declaring war on English, yet his battle was regenerative rather than terminal. By shattering 'coagulated' speech in works like 'Finnegans Wake', he aimed to return language to its raw, living state—renewed through chaos. Mauthner's uncompromising negation and Joyce's creative overhaul together redefine our relationship to speech, showing that only through both annihilation and reinvention people can reclaim its power of language.

Language of the unword

Shane Weller's 'Language and negativity in European modernism : toward a literature of the unword'[73] names a deliberate turn toward linguistic negativity, where writers strip language down to its limits and expose its failure as a vessel of thought. Samuel Beckett described his own words as a veil to be torn away, revealing only the silent 'nothings' beneath. Under James Joyce's guidance, Beckett read Fritz Mauthner's 'Critique der Sprache' and embraced three bleak insights: thinking is speaking, there is no truth beyond language, and the boundaries of expression are insurmountable. From this came a poetics of black comedy, nonsense, and absurdity—a systematic undoing of language's material weight that directly opposes Joyce's exuberant wordplay in Finnegans Wake. Long before Beckett, German-speaking modernists such as Hofmannsthal had already diagnosed a crisis: bureaucratic dehumanisation and alienation were mirrored by linguistic decay. Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and radical writers—Pound, Céline, Eliot, Joyce—pursued innovations that severed the shared bond between author and reader, demanding a 're-education' in which difficulty itself became the highest value. Techniques like parataxis, fragmentation and epanorthosis dramatises speech's provisional nature and foreground the impossibility of pure communication. This negation

[72] Kager, M. (2018). James Joyce and Fritz Mauthner: Multilingual Liberators of Language. The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory, 93(1), 39–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2018.1396082

[73] Weller, S. (2019). Language and negativity in European modernism : toward a literature of the unword. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, Ny: Cambridge University Press.

extends into a broader literary underworld—Kafka's subterranean fictions, Bataille's transgressions, Artaud's visceral theatre, the nihilism of de Sade and Genet—where life and literature collapse into one another and silence takes on a demonic force. Echoing Gorgias the sophist, with his paradoxologia and playful anti-language, this planned obsolescence of language reveals communication as a doomed techne, forever teasing us with its own undoing. In times of linguistic decay humanity stripped itself of mastery over word or world, embracing barbarism as its only authentic refrain. In this landscape of 'unwording', language is not merely exhausted but weaponised against itself. The result is a 'language of the unword' that lives in negation, a testament to voice rendered obsolete and reborn through the very failure of speech.

Stéphane Mallarmé's late-19th-century experiments cast language as an epistemological disaster born of The Tower of Babel's multiplicity. Words, he argued, are arbitrary signs whose true power lies in the silences between them, much like music's interplay of beat and pause. Influenced by Schopenhauer, Mallarmé sought to purify everyday speech into an essential poetic form, a 'dialect of the tribe' refined to its musical core. Gustave Flaubert, a generation earlier, had already likened human language to 'a cracked kettledrum', producing hollow echoes where we crave cosmic music. Roland Barthes later saw in Flaubert the birth of European literature's problematics: the destruction of language until only its 'carcass' remains. Borges's 'Funes the Memorious' (1942) and Hofmannsthal's critique of generalisation underscore language's failure to grasp radical singularities, driving writers toward the nameless, the unrepeatable. Fritz Mauthner, overlooked in modern philosophy, diagnosed our 'prison house of language', insisting no experience can be fully captured by words. His radical scepticism found literary form in Samuel Beckett's vision of humanity in ruins—where utterance tears away veils only to reveal 'nothings' and where linguistic negativism enacts the demise of speech itself. The reader, confronted with fragmentation and self-undermining syntax, experiences language's decomposition firsthand, and with it a lost faith in human connection. Ultimately language becomes a barrier, a frosted glass between people. A tool for alienation that serves the masses but fails the two individuals that search simple contact. The trajectory from Mallarmé to Mauthner charts a profound crisis: language, once the bond of mind to world, becomes its own undoing, a crisis that demands we confront the unword beneath every utterance.

After Joyce's exuberant exploration of language's possibilities, Beckett pushed English to the brink of unreadability, suggesting that doing nothing still counts as doing something—existence without the burden of meaning or purpose. For Beckett 'every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness', or something to be avoided. He even gave a silent interview for the Swedish TV after winning the Nobel Prize. As a writer and even more as a human, he found that had nothing to express. So his goal became expressing emptiness. The void of expression in Samuel Beckett's drama renders palpable the chasm between our innermost longings and the inadequate language we wield. The stage is filled with words that ring hollow or verge on the nonsensical. In 'Waiting for Godot', Vladimir laments their endless 'idle discourse', a chatter that never bridges hope and reality. Estragon's plaintive refrain, 'Nothing to be done', does not signal an absence of possible action but rather insists that nothing can ever truly be accomplished—an inevitability of stasis sealed by speech itself. Beckett's sparse dialogue exposes how language betrays desire and imposes a perpetual impasse, where talking becomes both refuge and prison, and the very act of expression confirms the futility it seeks to overcome.

'It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and style. To me they have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it - be it something or nothing - begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today'.

— Samuel Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1, 1929-1940

Beckett made it his mission to show that silence and absence can carry as much weight as sound and speech. Beckett's plays treat inaction and stillness not as voids but as profound interventions, questioning the crave of structure, order, and emotional triggers in art. They remind that words and images are merely prompts for chemical reactions in the body, and that beyond those reactions lies a raw materiality of brain and bone. Indeed, 'Nothing is to be done'. Etymologically, 'nothing' combines Old English nan ('not one') with thing, referring not to nonexistence but to an entity devoid of consequence. To express true emptiness in language is therefore to embrace silence, to let the unspoken speak for itself. In this way, Beckett's linguistic negativism reveals nothingness as a presence rather than an absence. To express nothing is to honour silence itself, allowing emptiness to become its own form of expression. But how to express nothing? If words lose any fixed meaning, then language can refuse its own logic. The primary tool of meaning could no longer convey what it is intended. Confronted with silence or nothingness, the choice is to harness it rather than ignore it. There is no empty space or time. But the feeling of emptiness cannot be expressed with words. Words are unnecessary stains on silence. Speaking only forestall the experience of the true void. The paradox of expressing nothing lies in this very tension: to achieve silence we must speak, even as our words carry the absence they seek to reveal. Beckett's Unnamable voice drifts without name, place, or purpose—asserting existence through ceaseless, rambling speech. Speech becomes survival, a bulwark against death's ultimate silence. By focusing on bodily processes—the breath, the heart, the act of speaking—both artists strip away any higher meaning, showing that our acts of communication serve only to sustain life itself. Beckett's 'literature of the unword' exposes speech's inevitable failure, while it may awaken us to life's immediacy. Failure to express something becomes the most potent way to express everything. The nameless is the origin of all things. Silence reveals that absence itself speak louder.

The limits of my word

In 'Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the limits of language'[74] Linda Ben-Zvi reveals how both placed language at the heart of their work only to methodically expose its failure. Beckett, reading Mauthner to a nearly blind Joyce, learnt that every claim—even 'I exist'—depends on words that cannot secure certainty. Mauthner, still largely untranslated, insisted that self-existence, thought, and philosophy are all linguistic constructions doomed to tautology. Proust found words no more than inadequate vehicles, and Beckett's theatre of the absurd grapples with the very problems language creates: how to question reality with tools that shape

[74] Ben-Zvi, L. (1980). Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language. PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 95, 183 - 200.

and restrict it. 'Poe's Law' says that if something is extreme enough, it is hard to tell whether it is a parody or serious—and people often confuse the two. Listening, speaking, thinking, writing, and reading can become exercises in 'Poe's Law', where intent is unreadable and parody can masquerade as sincerity. Without an unmistakable signal of the author's intention, any satirical or parodic statement of extreme beliefs may be taken by some readers as a genuine expression of those beliefs. It reminds us that, in the absence of clear contextual clues, even the most exaggerated mimicry can be misconstrued as sincerity. Mauthner and Beckett armed us with the means to dismantle all thought systems, even irrationalism, by revealing their shaky verbal foundations. In the end, philosophy itself proves a futile loop of words asking after words. Only by scrutinising the language of philosophers meaning re-forms. Recognising the limits of language is the first step beyond its confines, where words end and whatever lies beyond may begin.

Speaking can be a bad habit. Language, by its nature, is imprecise and always in constant flux. Words shift in meaning over time and lose the power to capture the full richness of our thoughts or experiences. Misunderstandings are not accidents but inevitable outcomes of this 'banal origin of meaning', as words function like religious rites—arbitrary, floating signs whose significance depends entirely on shared use. Philosophical puzzles often stem from treating these signs as fixed bridges to reality rather than provisional tools. As Wittgenstein put it, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', for every attempt to pin down existence in language risks distorting the very world it seeks to describe. To confront these limitations, thinkers must move beyond mere reform of grammar and vocabulary into a realm of meta-linguistics, acknowledging the gap between word and thing. Some truths evade words entirely and reveal themselves only through laughter's spontaneous outburst or the pregnant pause of silence. Laughter breaks the strictures of syntax to convey joy, irony, or dissent, while silence—vocal in its own right—marks respect, contemplation, or refusal. Both remind us that communication transcends the boundaries of spoken language and that meaning often lives in what we do not, or cannot, say.

Is thinking just speaking? Thought and speech are inseparable: thinking occurs only as an act of speaking—whether aloud, in inner voice, or through writing—and each utterance is a unique movement that cannot be perfectly repeated. Words do more than dress up preexisting ideas; their sound can transform a statement, convey moods or hidden desires, or even exist as pure noise or song. Language need not refer to an external reality: its signs arise solely from the speaker's activity and intention. Since all knowledge springs from sensory experience, and those sensations take shape as mental representations, every act of thought is already speech. When we say, 'I exist', we wield two linguistic creations—'I' and 'exist'—whose meanings live not in the physical world but in the network of human brains and intentions. A word gains significance only in its use by a speaker and in its reception by a listener; isolated sound structures or grammar rules remain dead until animated by human purpose. Ordinary language, flawed though it is, remains our only medium for expressing feeling, mood, and the subtle nuances of experience. Its highest form is poetry, where words return to their origin as song, suggesting the ineffable rather than asserting literal truth. If thinking is always speaking, then to deny speech is to deny thought itself—there is no thinking without speaking.

What if truth is just a belief? Fritz Mauthner held that truth is nothing more than coherence within the shifting conventions of ordinary language: only what our words can plainly express counts as true, and tautologies—statements like 'the water is wet'—merely rehearse familiar habits without adding new knowledge. Thomas Hobbes put it simply: belief is called truth,

because every judgment depends on the words we choose. For Mauthner, the lowest form of knowledge lives in these linguistic tautologies; the highest lies in laughter, and the final liberating act is the silence that follows when words expire of their own weight. He extended this scepticism to the foundations of science: Euclidean geometry, he argued, only fits our sensory conditions by contingent convenience, and it's purely formal inferences cannot deepen our understanding of the world. More broadly, every philosophy is a humanistic picture of reality, shaped by the anthropomorphic biases embedded in language. We remain captives of its arbitrary structures—ciphers in our own heads—and even mystics, who cloak themselves in unsayable unity, merely replace one set of linguistic conventions with another. As Nietzsche's poetic seductions show, when thinkers mistake their own artful language for theory, they abandon the critique they most need. If belief is called truth, then to question our words is to question the very truths we hold—and to glimpse the silence that lies beyond them.

Heidegger's portrayal of language as the 'house of Being' emphasises its fundamental role in shaping human existence, situating our understanding and experience of reality. But language serves much more than our everyday practical needs. It real power is when we try to speak of what lies beyond direct experience. Language can turn beliefs into truths. The goal of language is to start manipulating ourselves. In contrast, silence alone cannot mislead; it merges with nature's own muteness. If you use language long enough you inevitably will create a kind of religion as a peak point. Language is the dwelling place of all gods. God is born as a voice and exist as a story. The mystic inner voice is torn between the silence and the urge to communicate itself, striving 'to say the unsayable'. The language readily shelters every imaginable god. Mythology is a story of oriented causal life, a vector with a meaningful end. Storytelling give us structure, and tools for understanding and judging. Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards, said Soren Kierkegaard. Only in retrospect the pieces of everyday life can form a coherent picture. There must be a shared believe that, somehow, those moments will link up in the days ahead.

According to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, the structure of our language shapes our worldview—how we think, how we organise our thoughts, and how we map reality. Our mental models, the very theories we hold about the world and ourselves, depend on the words and grammar available to us. Though scholars debate whether language determines these models outright or merely influences them, language and perception are inseparable: we see the world through the lens of our words. Society exploits this fact by turning language into an obstacle course that keeps us perpetually dissatisfied and eager to act. Language games are the way societies exist. We are coached through slogans and product narratives to believe, love, crave and desire. Words resonate with our values and anxieties and reshape our worldviews and steer our behaviour. Yet there are those who refuse to play this linguistic game. Unbound by conventional expectations, they destroy old rules and invent new ones. Through creative destruction, they offer an outside perspective on the very language games that define society. By recognising these 'language games', we can begin to see how words govern our desires and choices—and perhaps learn to speak and think beyond the barriers they impose.

Self-deception of language

The self-deception of language works only temporarily. Nature eventually breaks the narrative and transforms all thing and words in an endless cycles. You cannot trap the ineffable in words, and introspective dissection can never yield clarity. Creating meaning using storytelling is basically speaking about thinking. In his 'Philosophical Investigations'

Wittgenstein famously said that 'philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is'. What about the language itself? In the end language can only describe reality. If humans can change nature inspired by words, it is only for a brief time. Every castle made of sand melts into the see. In the silence after the language the world will become again what it had been before speech. True reality lives in unarticulated experience, where no language games, identities, or distinctions between self and world are needed. Humanity's final response to indifference of nature is only silence, the purest critique of language. Silence is the ultimate god killer and the end of every ideology. It transcends language to embrace emptiness. In silence, nothing and yet everything becomes possible—no fixed truths, no exclusions; every utterance, however outlandish, finds its legitimacy. The linguistic cycle starts with simple speech that become increasingly complex while the building of the Tower of Babel in search of a conversation with God. At the end, the complex language becomes so incomprehensible that sounds like a babble. The tower of babble starts collapsing in laughter, irony, and ridicule. The home of God is no more. After the silence of the apocalypse the cycle starts again. If the word is indeed the home of gods, then in relinquishing words people return to the silent dwelling of the nature before gods.

The highest forms of critique of language are laughter and silence. No true criticism of language can be written in words, for every sentence only deepens our entanglement in speech. The only genuine rejection of words is laughter, a sudden rupture in the tyranny of meaning. Laughter does not explain or define; it frees us from our own verbal inventions and mocks the pretensions of every abstract system. In its contagious spontaneity—on stage, in opera, in the street—it shatters the illusion that language can ever capture life's immediacy. Yet even laughter falls short of the ultimate critique, which is silence. To cease speaking is to retreat from the endless treadmill of signifiers that race toward no milestone. Beckett's Waiting for Godot shows us that after every joke, every broken promise, there remains only the hush of expectation. In true silence, language dissolves back into pure presence, and we glimpse the mystery that words can never touch. As the weary philosopher Lucky laments, the scholar who believes insights may be wrung from language resembles a circus donkey elegantly pacing a wheel. Lured by promises of meaning and driven by the whip of theory, he works 'ever upward, in reality, ever in the same place'. Language knows no landmarks: every novel turn of phrase soon becomes obsolete, another rusted rung on the endless ladder of words. Linguistic puzzles only distract us from life's urgent needs. At the end, the practical is before the conceptual—shelter before syntax, solidarity before syllables. Existence precedes essence. While philosophers of language fret over imperfections in expression, countless human beings endure real hardship in factories and fields. Silence and laughter remind us of where our energies might better serve. The deepest truths of our being—our feelings, our living connection to nature—remain forever inaccessible to articulation. Every attempt to capture the mystical state in vocabulary only destroys its evanescent purity. Thus, the mystic's laughter and the artist's silent pause stand as the last, unutterable words. When words fail, laughter and silence emerge as our final critique of language. They expose the futility of endless discoursing and release us into immediacy. In their wake, we may turn our attention from the ghostly apparatus of speech to the pressing, unspoken needs of the living world.

If meaning in language is lost, the overall feeling of existence is over; truth and meaning must then be artificially created. The question is can anything truly exist without language? If nothing truly exists, language becomes our power to create from the void—crafting worlds that lie outside nature's bounds. Yet the effects of nonsense can rival or even surpass those of sober

sense: any utterance is nonsense to someone who does not share its rules, for no meaning is fixed. Sense, rooted in perception and judgment, arises through interpretation—the Latin sentire ('to feel, to go') suggests a mental journey from sensation to understanding. Nonsense, by contrast, wears many masks—absurdity, drivel, folly—and serves as an indirect form of communication that undercuts its own coherence to expose the limits of reason. Wittgenstein observed in his preface to the 'Tractatus' that nonsense defines the boundary of language: propositions that overstep what can be said must resort to the nonsensical. His own system, he admitted, employs a self-refuting strategy—a deliberate nonsense—to gesture toward what lies beyond words. In this interplay, sense and nonsense are inseparable: each movement of meaning depends on the possibility of misstep, and every nonsensical turn highlights the fragile bridge between our words and any world they might describe. 'Non signification' reveals that in the dance of sense and nonsense, meaning is never a substance but a shimmering edge—where creation from nothing meets the silence beyond language. Words are not the measure of all things.

'The fish trap exists because of the fish. Once you've gotten the fish you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit. Once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning. Once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can talk with him?'

— *Zhuangzi, Chuang Tsu: Inner Chapters*

Society is its language. Words are the measure of people who use them. Even scientific theories do not unearth a pre-existing world but construct it through conceptual signs so that it becomes intelligible. Outside those constructs lies only disorder, for language alone orders our experience and spins the narratives we accept as real. Turning communication into a contest of manipulation or artifice—chasing novelty, power, or applause—reduces words to noise, erodes empathy and makes language an end rather than a bridge to another mind. Sign’s meaning rests on the arbitrary link between name and sound, so any linguistic claim leaves language as the sole proof of existence. Language exists to create a community. The only useful meaning of words is their shared understanding. This put the individual in a difficult position. His lack of freedom is often a linguistic bondage under the watch of his inner speech. Freedom begins by stripping away every societal rule he can live without and identifying the few conditions essential to his happiness. Those very preconditions his inner dialogue has been trained to suppress. Societal language fears intellectual contentment, for once one finds meaning he lose the restlessness that fuels ambition and production. Instead, individuals are meant to remain perpetually incomplete, driven by unsatisfied needs and a compulsive search that never ends. The internal dissent mirrors the discord society demands. Through its language, society manufactures misunderstanding and division—an endless 'divide and rule' strategy that keeps people in motion and reproduces conflict. The moment a blessed stillness is attained, people become inert, ending the cycle of consumption and experiment that society depends on. Nothingness, that pause in motion, is anathema to the social order; instead, perpetual activity and consumption are pushed by voices that serve the system, not personal well-being. Society is not an ally, and neither are its agents who invade the mind with words designed to keep one discontented. Since society literally is its language, true freedom requires reclaiming an inner dialogue—learning to speak and think in ways that defy perpetual unrest and rediscover the quiet core of genuine happiness. The self-deception of societal language is transitory.

Thinking as speaking

Is language the foundation of thought? Mauthner's critique rests on the claim that language itself—not merely a vehicle for expression or a speculative tool—occupies the foremost position in human thought. He argues that thought cannot exist apart from language. By converting every form of knowledge into a mode of speech, Mauthner effectively reduces thinking to habitual linguistic patterns, so that what we call knowledge is nothing more than the language we currently employ. Rather than granting us direct insight into reality, language reveals the diversity of human communities: each society, through its own tongue, embodies a distinct logic. Mauthner thus contends that the variety of linguistic structures gives rise to as many different logics as there are languages. Mauthner's perspective forces us to recognise language not as a mere tool but as the very substance of thought, shaping our knowledge and reflecting the plural logics of diverse cultures. In 'Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language' Linda Ben-Zvi indicates eight analogies between the two authors regarding the treatment of language: 1. Thinking and talking are one activity; 2. Language and memory are synonyms; 3. All language is metaphor; 4. There are no absolutes; 5. The ego is contingent; it does not exist apart from language; 6. Communication between men is impossible; 7. The only language should be simple language; 8. The highest forms of a critique of language are laughter and silence

Thinking and speaking are one activity! There is only language. Mauthner insists that thinking and speaking form a single activity: there is nothing but language. What we call thought is simply language in operation. There is no realm of thinking apart from words, and the notion of thinking as an inner, non-linguistic faculty is a lifeless symbol for what is in fact our capacity to use language. Men believe they think when they only speak. In this view, knowledge collapses into speech; thinking becomes a pattern of observable linguistic habits, nothing more than the current usage of a tongue. Because no one can master all languages, language does not grant universal insight; it merely displays the diversity of human societies. What we know is what we say, and our utterances reflect who we are and where we live. There is no single, underlying skeletal structure to all tongues, no singular logic. Instead, each language embodies its own logic, revealing the worldviews of its speakers. Knowledge is just a reflection of society. Samuel Beckett, in works such as 'The Unnamable' (1932), offers a literary answer to Mauthner's critique: let characters speak until their words become signs of the very failure of knowledge. Rather than conveying meaning, those utterances make visible the impossibility of stepping beyond language. Communication becomes a church of stale words, and each babble—each inability to articulate—is a testament to the limits of knowing. The narrator of 'The Unnamable' confesses, 'I am a big talking ball, talking about things that do not exist, or that exist perhaps, impossible to know, beside the point'. Yet as the voice persists—speaking while aware of its own falsity and indifference to content—it listens not to itself but to the silence beneath its words. These unfathomable abysses of silence are akin to the pauses amid a symphony: they reveal the necessary space in which speech arises. Words, though they apply to our situation, never bring us closer to true knowledge. Beckett's 'Fizzles' dramatises that all we need to say is already known, and beyond what is spoken there is nothing. The figure of failed communication, becomes the only art worth pursuing—a quiet despair born of recognising that reality remains forever out of reach. In accepting this, we enact a calm suicide of both thinking and speaking, a denial of self-deception. Language is not merely the tool of thought but its very essence. Attempts to find an inner, pre-linguistic thinking betray the truth that all knowledge, all insight, is bound up in words. To confront this reality is to embrace both

the impotence and the necessity of speech, and to live within the silence that makes language possible.

Language and memory are synonymous. According to Mauthner, both speech and thought originate in sense impressions—our recollections of what we have perceived. Memory serves as the bridge between raw sensory experience and language. The life of the soul, he argues, is nothing but memory; reason or conceptual thought is simply our soul's memory of its own impressions, articulated in words. Under this view, language is nothing more than an individual's record of experience. A personal memory. We so thoroughly confuse our memories of similar events with the concepts and words we use to describe them that it would often be clearer to speak of language instead of memory, and of words rather than recollections. Words stand as the sole markers of our memories. Writers such as Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett have celebrated the power of involuntary memory to reclaim vanished images of the past—'breaking the habit' of linear time to capture a more ideal reality. But Mauthner rejects this poetic notion. For him, every act of remembering is inherently distorted: memory confuses identity with mere similarity and does so imperfectly. This fundamental error in memory is not a flaw to be corrected but the very condition that makes thought and language possible. Without our capacity to misremember—to confuse one echo of experience with another—and without our power to forget and edit our recollections, we would lack the raw material for concepts and words. Memory, in its fallibility, is both the engine of intellectual development and how we continue to live and think. Language and memory are two sides of the same coin. Every word we utter is a testament to our imperfect recall, and every act of forgetting permits new thoughts to emerge. In recognising that language itself is our personal archive of sensory impressions—shaped by error and refined by omission—we see that our capacity for speech and for memory are fundamentally inseparable.

Is language just a metaphor? All language is born of memory's imperfect record of past sensory experience, and so every word is at best an approximation—a metaphor for reality. No utterance carries any meaning apart from its figural likeness to something felt or seen. Language links what we have experienced with what we can articulate, creating pictures of pictures of pictures, always one step removed from the original. Our words arise from the chance distortions of memory. These Zufall moments become the building blocks of our tongue, extended by metaphorical conquest until every knowable thing is named—but never fully grasped. What we recall is not the event itself but a shadow of it; our senses are transient, and all is in flux. Certainty eludes us, for man cannot move beyond the confines of memory. Memory's fallibility brings two unexpected gifts. First, it frees us from time's strictures. By recalling past events—even imprecisely—we can draw inferences and forge connections across eras, a necessary condition for thought. Second, memory offers respite from pain. By objectifying sorrowful moments through recollection—or, as Samuel Beckett's Unnamable puts it, 'I who am here, I don't know where I shall be'—we distance ourselves from immediate suffering. In making our lives the subject of thought, language becomes a kind of magic, turning agony into reflection and yielding the calm cheerfulness that few great minds achieve. Yet memory's power to liberate also hinders our ability to live fully in the now. The more we dwell on the past, the less present we become, caught between the comfort of recollection and the impossibility of unmediated experience. Because every word depends on an imperfect memory of sensation, language remains a web of metaphors—each term a homage to what once was and a barrier to what truly is. In this recognition lies both our intellectual freedom and our perpetual longing for reality unspoken.

There are no absolutes

Mautner rejects any claim to knowledge of God, nature, or even the self. There are no absolutes. He argues that truth itself is a metaphorical construct: just as humanity formed the idea of God without direct experience, so too we invented truth. What we call a law of nature is merely our mind's habit of framing inductive concepts in language. Even nature, in Mautner's view, becomes subject to human speech—nothing exists outside the shadow cast by our words. To transcend memory and the common usage of words, Mautner insists, one must free oneself from language. Yet any attempt to express that freedom through speech is self-defeating. The only route, he suggests, lies in self-destroying sentences—phrases arranged like musical measures with deliberate pauses, tones, and silences that erase their own meaning. Here the meaning is life itself, lived and experienced rather than named. Samuel Beckett's characters echo this struggle. They recognise language as the barrier that renders their task impossible. Continuously they search for words that will allow them to fall silent, to communicate without speaking, but they fail. They long instead for moments of real communion—like sharing a beer with an old friend, where conversation drifts and pauses, where the focus shifts from the words to the shared presence. In that liminal space the language tool dissolves, becoming a mere channel for closeness. In the silence between tones, one seeks the man who no longer relies on language's empty absolutes. A figure who, like the speaker in Beckett's 'The Unnamable', exists beyond words—someone close, someone known without being named. It is in that unspoken bond, free from concepts of ultimate truth or fixed meaning, that genuine connection endures. By denying absolute truths and exposing words as mere metaphors for experience, Mautner and Beckett reveal language as both our greatest tool and our deepest constraint. We yearn for a communion beyond speech—an encounter that affirms life in its raw immediacy, unfiltered by the very words that claim to capture it.

The ego is contingent. It does not exist apart from language. The notion of a stable, enduring self is no more than a myth. Each moment lives and dies with our fleeting impressions, leaving no continuous 'I' behind. We become prisoners of time, our personalities reduced to statistics that can only be reconstructed—if at all—as a retrospective hypothesis. Memory alone seems to corroborate an ongoing self, yet memory itself is notoriously untrustworthy. Though we may feel a coherent identity, any attempt to locate a 'me' within reveals only absence. The present 'I am' soon slips into 'I was', and without recollection the ego vanishes into a black void. Few dare to confront this process head-on; most either fall silent or erect a flimsy fortress of words, playing philosopher to mask the flux of becoming. As Samuel Beckett's heroes realise, when everything melts into waves and particles there remain only nameless things and thing-less names. Language hails down like ice, its frozen meanings betraying the world's rotting labels. Even if an ego could somehow be found, it would lack the means to express itself: speech is tailored for describing the external, not for observing the inner. There exists no organ for the self to survey itself, and the 'I' can never encounter a fully objective 'me'. The subjective self seeks validation only through another's testimony—yet when language fails, 'I don't speak to myself anymore'. A stranger's voice issues forth, conscious of its own falsehood, indifferent to its own emptiness. We inhabit the same tongue yet stand on opposite banks of its currents. Only through language do 'mind' and 'body' appear as separate entities; they flow as one. Our unity of life is cleaved by words into disjointed concepts. Voices in our heads echo this fracture, reminding us that every term we know was forged by the accidents of memory and metaphor. By denying any absolute, unmediated self, we see the ego as wholly contingent on the treacherous medium of language and memory. No stable 'I' precedes speech; every attempt at

self-knowledge collapses into silence or contradiction. In this void, only the living flux remains—untouchable by words, yet ever demanding we listen beyond their hollow echo.

Communication between men is impossible. Language always requires at least two participants, for it is a coupling of minds—an intellectual begetting. Yet no exchange, however earnest, can guarantee shared understanding. Every word arises from individual experience and serves as a metaphorical echo of past sensations. When we speak, we do not transmit pure thought but distribute words as one might hand out banknotes—each bearer trusting but never certain of their value. What, then, is language? Nothing more than a collective agreement, a convention akin to the rules of a game. Its power lies in the number of players: the more who join, the more compelling the convention becomes. Still, it never seizes or alters reality itself. It only mirrors the historical usage that shapes each speaker's worldview. In ordinary life—a tavern's chatter, the delights of gossip, the waiter's summons—most find language wholly sufficient and never sense its limits. Only a fool—or a Beckett hero—yearns to be understood. Despite knowing their words fall short, they crave a listener, fearing isolation. They enact a ritual of dialogue, speaking in the pauses of another's utterance, each seeking a hook on which to hang personal thoughts. Even the simplest language, stripped of abstraction, cannot banish ambiguity. No reform can fix these inherent gaps; we can only approach language with scepticism, using it sparingly and with humility. However precise our diction, the exalted notion of absolute truth remains nothing more than human babble. Every spoken word reveals the impossibility of full communion. Language binds us in convention, offers only metaphoric approximations of reality, and conceals as much as it discloses. True mastery of word or world eludes us all.

The only language should be simple language. For all his doubts about the power of words, Mauthner insists that whenever we speak, we ought to choose only the most straightforward terms. He faults established philosophy and much intellectual endeavour for turning words into abstract entities—detaching them from everyday speech. Although he argues that language can never fully capture reality, Mauthner remains committed to purifying it. By stripping language of lofty abstractions, he believes we can free ourselves from 'word-superstition' (Wortaberglauben). As Mauthner warns, language loses its purpose when it ceases to address human needs and instead tries to fulfil elevated spiritual longings that lie beyond our immediate condition. Yet he recognises that even the simplest vocabulary cannot eliminate ambiguity. As Gershon Weiler observes, Mauthner's project is not a plan to remake language but an exercise in cultivating a sceptical vigilance toward it. No matter how plain our words, they remain our own creations, and the aim of the Critique is to expose that confinement. 'I preferred everyday language to a learnt definition in order to make clear how little a definition explains', he confesses. Samuel Beckett shares Mauthner's faith in simplicity as a communicative aid, but he too sees it as only a small remedy against life's fundamental unknowability. His plays and prose—whether in English or French—favours terse declarations and reject what his characters Mercier and Camier dismiss as 'the stink of artifice'. In Malone Dies, Malone rails against prettified phrases that 'pollute the whole of speech', warning that 'nothing is more real than nothing' until one guards against their seductive emptiness. Yet even Beckett's stripped-down dialogue fails to bridge the gap between speaker and meaning: words still cannot convey their speakers' true state. In his own words, 'The exalted notion of truth is human babble'. Both Mauthner and Beckett urge us toward language pared to essentials, believing that only by renouncing jargon and abstraction can we glimpse the limits of our own words. Yet they agree that, however plain our speech, it can never fully escape its built-in uncertainties. In the end, simplicity may reveal the startling fact that human language is forever an imperfect tool for expressing reality.

Master or servant

In 'Master or Servant: Language in Thomas Hobbes' Political Philosophy'[75] Aleksei Pleshkov asks the following questions: How might our use of language illuminate the boundary between natural philosophy and political philosophy? To what extent can a sovereign authority shape or control the language its subjects employ? Is it possible to differentiate the language that flourishes within a commonwealth from that which prevails in the state of nature? Thomas Hobbes denies any absolute knowledge in physics, insisting that God created nature while humans create the state—and come to know it only through language. Language guarantees political and moral truths yet can also stall the progress of civil science: reason is not innate but learnt through words, and speech can inflame vanity, pride, and mass irrationality. All terms are arbitrary and ever-shifting, so without shared meanings there can be no community. Thucydides shows how revolutions in Corcyra were conditioned by changing definitions, as factions weaponised words to fracture trust and unleash slaughter. In the state of nature, every party speaks its own terms, making civil war almost inevitable. Hobbes argues that only a sovereign can transform 'worded nature' into social order, by enforcing common definitions, punishing deviance, and giving performative force to promises, laws and oaths. The civil contract is thus also a linguistic contract: language becomes a servant when authority secures agreement on meaning, binding citizens beyond the volatility of mere sounds. Without such arbitration, the same tool that could unite us only manufactures dissent and division. 'The paradox of the social contract' turns on the fact that a civil authority both presupposes and produces the shared language that makes a binding agreement possible. On the one hand, the very act of contracting requires a common understanding of words whose meanings the sovereign alone can fix and enforce. Yet the contract is postulated as the moment when people escape the state of nature to erect that sovereign power. Hobbes treats the state of nature not as a real historical epoch but as a theoretical extreme—a pure hypothesis of 'anti-sociality' overcome only by an ideal contract. Language itself does not change at the founding of the state; rather, only within civil society can language fully realise its power to command, promise, and oblige. Thus the sovereign indeed governs language, yet that governance simply enables language's social potency, which remains latent in the natural condition. In sum, the social contract both requires and creates the very linguistic unity it presupposes. Unchecked, language rules us as a master; but under rightful authority it becomes our servant, forging the commonwealth we cannot build by words alone.

In 'Metaphor of translation: Borges and Mauthner's critique of language' [76] Silvia G. Dapias shows how Mauthner drew on a hidden lineage from medieval nominalists through Hobbes, Herder, and Vico to revive a radical critique: language is an ill-suited tool for knowing reality yet remains our essential communal worldview and social force. Words do not faithfully mirror experience but translate sensations into concepts we all agree to use. No extra-linguistic realm exists to test our claims—truth and falsity belong only to sentences, as Hobbes argued—and meaning arises solely from the shared rules of a linguistic community. The fanciful notion that any speaker can unilaterally dictate a word's sense is overturned by the social 'game' that coordinates speech: more players make its rules stronger, and violations are self-defeating. Thinking of language as a metaphor of translation reminds us that every utterance negotiates between raw experience and the collective code we call speech, binding us together even as it

[75] Pleshkov, A. (2014). Master or Servant: Language in Thomas Hobbes' Political Philosophy. SSRN Electronic Journal. doi:https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2512784.

[76] Silvia Dapía, "The Metaphor of Translation: Borges and Mauthner's Critique of Language," Variaciones Borges, Vol. 21 (2006), pp. 23–85: p. 27.

constrains what we can know. In a language game we need not look beyond its own rules for objects to correspond with every word or phrase; communication often aims less at conveying facts than at shaping another's beliefs to serve our interests. Yet when words become empty sounds—as in babbling or word superstition—we fall into the trap of assuming that every term must name something real, just as ancient peoples linked earthquakes to gods. This intellectual weakness stems from a nominalist impulse: to treat universals or abstractions as mere labels, and to deny any extra-linguistic reality by default. Johann Georg Hamann anticipated Wittgenstein in arguing that reason itself is grounded in language—logos—which privileges metaphor, symbol, and poetic expression over sterile logic. For Hamann, poetry is humanity's mother tongue, and language acts as a living bridge mediating our inner reflections, our relations with one another, and our grasp of the world or the divine. Recognising speech as a 'language game' reveals both its power to shape minds and its limits as a purely social practice.

What is a verum factum principle? Giambattista Vico argued that truth is verified only through what humans create, not through detached observation. In 'Scienza Nuova' (1725), he likened civil society to a mathematical construction: as communities evolve, so do their languages, myths, customs, and economies. Genuine knowledge of a society must therefore arise from its own shared expressions and institutions. Vico identified three recurring ages, each defined by a dominant linguistic trope: the Divine Age, where metaphor linked humans to nature; the Heroic Age, where metonymy and synecdoche supported monarchic and feudal orders; and the Human Age, where irony and rational discourse enabled popular democracy. These cycles reflect an eternal history of rise, decline and rebirth—as reason and poetic imagination alternately flourish and fade. For Vico, all philosophy must begin with the 'common sense' of ordinary people, whose poetic signs and communal prejudices give birth to civil life. By tracing truth back to human invention—'verum factum' ('the true is made')—he challenged any claim to universality divorced from culture and reminded us that our deepest insights emerge from the stories we tell and the worlds we build together. The verum factum principle teaches that only by recognising truth in our own creative acts can we restore human reason to its rightful, practical foundation.

Words are wandering. Translation offers a privileged prism on identity and belonging: languages are never possessions but borrowings, never pure but contagious, never static capital but perpetual transit. Our attachment to a mother tongue is less a tie to soil or nation than a refuge for voices that have journeyed across time and borders. Language evolves through constant borrowing, bastardisation, stratification, and contingency—each tongue a temporary harbour for words on the move. The fin-de-siècle crisis Mauthner diagnosed among Schnitzler, Wittgenstein, Kraus, and Musil only underscores that language both shapes and limits our grasp of reality. No speech is autochthonous: every word exists between human beings, and linguistic purism mistakes a static inventory for a living exchange. Instead, we should celebrate translation and the endless circulation of 'hereditary wisdom' that makes each language a waypoint in the larger odyssey of human thought. Words are forever wanderers, finding momentary rest in our mouths before they continue their unending journey.

When Humpty Dumpty declares, 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less', Lewis Carroll satirises the arrogance of those who seize language as a tool of power. The real question is not whether words can bear so many senses, but which party—speaker or listener—will dominate their meaning. Humpty Dumpty, a thinly veiled portrait of sophists who wield jargon like a weapon, shows how obfuscation silences challenge: if your audience cannot grasp your claims, they cannot question them. In the resulting word

salad, thinking itself seems optional. Humpty Dumpty is the master of meaning only if he is a master in real life. The key term, 'master', derives from Old English mægester and Latin magister—'one who exercises authority'. Humpty Dumpty's power over meaning warns that whoever claims mastery over words can claim power over reality. The linguistic master can dictate our world—until the fragile egg of arbitrary definition inevitably cracks.

Signifying nothing

In fifth-century Athens, the original sophists, once paragons of virtue, became itinerant teachers of persuasive speech, open only to those who could pay. Aristophanes' 'Clouds lampoons this shift in the mastery of rhetorics. With language only you can win any case by pitting the 'weaker argument' against justice. By swaying juries rather than appealing to truth, you triumph in court but unleash chaos at home, beating civic order alike. Sophistic training heralded Athens' turn from heroic ethics to democratic rhetoric, where mastery of logos, speech's power to shape belief, replaced any claim to objective reality. Protagoras's dictum, 'man is the measure of all things', casts nomos (convention) over nature, and the sophists deny any criterion beyond the conventions of language. They collapse knowledge into opinion, treat truth as a matter of forceful discourse, and insist that logos never refers to things-in-themselves but only to its own structures. By entrapping thought within its own arrangements of words, speech becomes both our tool and our master, binding people to the conventions they mistake for reality. When rhetoric conquers truth, language both fashions our world and holds us captive.

In 'Signifying nothing: The problem of language in Gorgias'[77] Christine Maisto reveals that in the Gorgianic tradition of radical nominalism, words are not mirrors of things but autonomous signifiers that ultimately point only to themselves. Language wields immense power—shaping our emotions, thoughts, and beliefs—yet it remains empty of the reality it purports to convey. This tautological autonomy grants language a bewitching force: it determines what we can perceive, fractures our grasp of truth, and even binds us more tightly than any external reality. Speech fills the gulf between mind and world by standing in for absent objects, enabling us to speak of the non-existent and to fashion entire realms of meaning from metaphor, analogy, and allegory. But this very opacity makes genuine communication impossible. No matter how precise our vocabulary, words remain logical abstractions disconnected from the material substances they claim to name—whether brain cells or the objects of Jonathan Swift's flying island Laputa, where speech is so corrosive that islanders display things instead of talking about them. And yet language lives in the cadence of sound and gesture—in a whispered 'I love you', a beating heart or a shared glance—reminding us that words carry affect even when their referents vanish. In the endless play of sign and counter-sign, every utterance risks missing its mark, every interpretation slips into misreading, and every claim to mastery over words invites nihilism. If language, in its self-referential dance, truly signifies nothing, then it becomes both the prison and the proof of our endless search for meaning.

Melissus of Samos, in his fifth-century BC treatise 'On Nature or On What-Is', insists that reality is a single, motionless, infinite Being. Nothing can arise from non-being, and no change

[77] Maisto, Chrisitne Marie (2014). Signifying Nothing: The Problem of Language in Gorgias, University of California, Santa Barbara

or plurality occurs. If we take him seriously, this means 'nothing is' in any plural or changing sense. If we dismiss him as parody, then even logos loses its claim to reality. For Melissus, 'what is' coincides with nature itself, while 'what is not' belongs only to human convention. This radical monism severs any necessary link between thought and the world: we can conceive the non-existent, but such speech yields no genuine knowledge. Like Gorgias's Encomium of Helen, which debates the innocence of someone who never existed, Melissus reveals that doxical truth rests on opinion, not on shared reality. Language, being tethered to private sensations and habits, cannot reliably transmit the essence of things. Even if we all learn the same words, each mind forms its own fleeting image, and those images can never coincide exactly. Words mean only by the associations we cultivate through experience, becoming rituals of speech that drift farther from any stable referent. If nature alone 'is' and everything else—including language belongs to mere convention, then our words, however fervently uttered, ultimately signify nothing outside the limits of our individual perceptions.

'On Nature or What-Is-Not' by Gorgias is responding to a well-known thesis from 'The Way of Truth' by Parmenides: 'For the same thing is for thinking and for being. It is right both to say and to think that it is what-is; For it can be, but nothing is not'. Parmenides of Elea authored a two-part poem—only the first half largely survives—distinguishing two 'ways' of inquiry. The first, the 'Way of Truth or Persuasion', insists that 'what is' must be the object of thought and language, because non-being cannot be known or spoken of. The second 'way', that 'what is not' exists or should be, is dismissed as entirely unthinkable and inexpressible. Thus Parmenides concludes that reality is a single, unchanging 'what is', and that genuine inquiry must follow this path alone. The response of Gorgias is that 'what is' is just empty linguistic expression. Gorgias's 'On Nature or What-Is-Not' advances a radical three-step argument: first, he shows that nothing can exist—anything purportedly 'Being' fails every test (it can't be Non-Being, both, temporal, eternal, one, or many) and so 'nothing exists'. Second, even if something did exist, our minds could only think of 'not-being' (since we can imagine chariots running on water or winged men), so true being would be unthinkable. Third, and finally, whatever might be thinkable could never be communicated: each sense perceives only its own object (sight sees light, hearing hears sound), and language (logos) is merely a conventional symbol, incapable of exactly reproducing any perception. From these three claims Gorgias infers that nothing exists; if it did, it could not be thought; and if it were thought, it could not be spoken. The words are not the things. Logos is the way by which we communicate. But logos is not the objects, the things that are. Language does not transmit objects, but only words. Signs are not their signifier. All words are empty signifiers or mere copies of themselves. A word signifies nothing, or nothing other than signifying itself. While language is our vehicle for communication, the only thing it communicates its language itself. The media of language is the only message. There is a natural gap between language and reality that make perfect communication impossible.

Impossible communication means that meaning is always deferred. Meaning is just a feeling, an experience not of explanation but of appearance. With language and storytelling we encounter a new artificial reality rather than an understanding of the physical reality. Language is a form of activity that involves the production of meaning. Manufacturing meaning is the 'semiotic economy' of the mass languages. Semiotic economy refers to how a limited set of simple basic elements can yield an endless array of complex 'meaningful' expressions. In languages, this is achieved through 'double articulation': a small inventory of indivisible sounds (phonemes) can be recombined into a vast vocabulary of words. For example, English relies on just forty-odd phonemes yet manages to produce hundreds of thousands of distinct words. So

the development of any mass language is a process of manufacturing artificial meaning. In semiosis, or sign process, every sign stands in place of something else, and the world unfolds through these signs. Familiar objects become entries in our perceptual grammar, for language arises before speech and fashions reality in the mind. Speech gives that mental work voice, and listening materialises thought. Confronted with chaos, communication relies on shared conventions—a consensus on codes that demand reciprocity. Semiosis weaves signal and noise in context, and beyond human interpretation, reality remains unknowable. Our linguistic form of subjectivity emerges as the projection and presentation that names reality and makes it possible. 'Semiotic economy' reveals that language does not mirror some independent world but actively constructs a meaningful reality to inhabit.

Semiotic economy

Herrmann-Pillath and Nöth's 'Semiotics and Economics: The General Framework'[78] reviews two centuries of attempts to relate the study of signs to the study of exchange, and argues that despite early synergies—Leibniz on coins vs. words, Marx on commodities as 'social hieroglyphics', Jakobson on goods-as-utilities vs. messages—modern economics and semiotics have largely drifted apart. Mainstream economics treats language as 'cheap talk'(behavioural noise) or bias, while semiotics often confines itself to ideological critique or niche topics (advertising, money, consumer culture). Eastern-Bloc planners once sought to harness semiotics for centralised economic control, and Romanian scholars tried to axiomatise economics via Morrisian semiotics, but these projects remained marginal. Today, 'narrative economics', behavioural framing, neuroeconomics, and institutional theory gesture toward the symbolic dimensions of economic action but stop short of a full semiotic account, retaining faith in a rational core that transcends language. The authors call for a genuine 'semiotic turn' in economics—one in which economists recognise markets, money, institutions, and coordination as fundamentally sign-mediated, and semioticians engage with current economic models. But what rather than a semiotic turn in economics, what the humanities urgently need is an economic turn in linguistics? An approach that treats language itself as an 'economy of signs'. In this 'semiotic economy', the structural logic of scarcity, exchange, and productivity governs how meaning is generated, distributed, hoarded, and consumed. Just as prices coordinate supply and demand, linguistic economies regulate competition among signifiers in the markets of meaning. Words behave like commodities—each with a limited supply (phonemes, morphemes) and an exchange value negotiated through usage. Linguists should map how semantic 'prices' (markedness, prestige, novelty) allocate attention and shape lexicons. The institutions of language like grammars, style guides, editorial standards, and serialisation protocols function like financial regulators. They stabilise the 'currency' of language and define what constitutes valid sign-transactions. An economic turn in linguistics will study how these institutions emerge, how they constrain innovation, and how they broker the collective trust necessary for communication. Just as payment networks and supply chains facilitate the movement of goods, communicative infrastructures—from printing presses to social media platforms—mediate the flows and bottlenecks of signs. A semiotic economy perspective analyses where linguistic 'traffic jams' occur (jargon, misinformation) and how technological

[78] Carsten Herrmann-Pillath and Winfried Nöth (2023). Presentation: Semiotics and Economics, the General Framework. RSSI/RSSI. Recherches sémiotiques. Semiotic inquiry, 40(2-3), pp.19–32. doi:https://doi.org/10.7202/1098859ar.

or social interventions can unclog them. Risk, speculation, and value also affect the linguistic economy. Languages evolve through metaphor, pun, and novelty—forms of 'speculation' on semantic possibilities. Like financial markets, linguistic communities hedge their bets on new expressions, sometimes seeing high 'returns' in clarity or innovation, sometimes suffering 'losses' in misunderstanding or obsolescence. The linguistic obsolescence can be result of the same forces that bring 'planned obsolescence' in economy. The 'economic turn in linguistics' means recognising that language is itself a market of signs—and by mastering economic concepts of exchange and institution—can we fully illuminate the joint processes by which meaning and value co–produce our social world.

In the economy of semiosis, the main question is: What is the role of novelty, risk, speculation, and obsolescence in language? Just as manufacturers design products with built-in expiry dates to shorten replacement cycles and drive repeat sales, linguistic communities too can manufacture obsolescence—deliberately or inadvertently—through cycles of novelty and jargon. In economic terms, planned obsolescence relies on an information asymmetry: producers know that a gadget is engineered to fail or fall out of fashion, while consumers trust its durability. Similarly, speakers and writers often introduce fresh metaphors, buzzwords, or technical terms that carry high 'speculative' appeal—promising clarity, exclusivity, or innovation—but that may quickly lose value as contexts shift or fashions change. Both phenomena emerge from the same underlying forces of competition and market control. In an oligopolistic market, firms can count on brand loyalty to secure repeat business; in elite or technical discourse, communities of practice tacitly reinforce in-group terminology, making older terms feel 'outdated' or 'inefficient', and driving users toward the latest expressions. When competition intensifies—whether between carmakers vying on durability or between professional communities debating precise vocabulary—product lifespans lengthen, and language stabilises. But under conditions of planned scarcity—of parts or of shared meaning—both machines and words age prematurely. Thus, understanding language evolution as a parallel to economic obsolescence highlights how 'speculation' on semantic possibilities can yield both high returns in expressiveness and steep losses in comprehensibility. Just as consumers may resent a phone that abruptly quits working, users may recoil at jargon that suddenly loses purchase. In both markets—of goods and of signs—the deliberate shortening of useful life serves the interests of producers (and coiners of terms), but at the cost of eroding trust, inflating transaction costs, and fuelling cycles of perpetual replacement. It seems like the push for novelty, risk and speculation can bring planned obsolescence and shorten the life cycle of meaning in language.

If words and language are not signifying anything, then how men can describe themselves and create identity and symbolic space or world to live in? Although no word ever 'captures' reality in a pure, one-to-one fashion—because every sign is a selective slice of experience rather than the thing itself—language nonetheless provides the very scaffolding in which human selves and worlds are built. When we learn a language, we inherit a system of terms and categories that carve up our sensory and social experience into meaningful parcels: 'tree', 'justice', 'friend', 'war', and so on. These parcels are not empty—they each carry a constellation of associations, emotions, norms, and expectations that have been gathered over centuries of use. In this way, language does not 'signify nothing;' it signposts whole constellations of shared human experience. Your given name and family name are not arbitrary pin-numbers. They link you to a lineage, a culture, perhaps a religion. When people address you by name, they are invoking that network of relationships and meanings. When you describe yourself, you are

choosing one or more nodes in that linguistic network to anchor your sense of who you are. Each label brings with it a set of cultural scripts, rights, duties, and possible narratives. We make sense of our lives by telling stories to ourselves and to others: 'I grew up in a small town, always dreaming of city lights'. Even if none of these sentences exactly 'captures' reality, the very act of weaving them together constructs a 'symbolic world' in which you have agency, purpose, and continuity. The words function like pieces of a mosaic; taken together, they paint a coherent—if imperfect—self-portrait. Institutions—from money to marriage to the nation—exist only as shared linguistic constructs: The word dollar is 'worth' anything only because we collectively treat it as a sign of purchasing power.

In each case, language creates a 'symbolic space' governed by rules we agree to follow. These spaces are every bit as real—economically, legally, emotionally—as the physical world. Philosopher J.L. Austin introduced the idea of 'speech acts'—utterances that do not merely describe but perform an action: 'I now pronounce you'. In performing these verbal rituals, we create new social realities instantly. Our 'symbolic world' is not just a passive mirror of the physical; through language we can conjure institutions, relationships, and obligations into existence. Because every sign is provisional and context-bound, individuals and communities can—and must—continually renegotiate meanings. Activists reclaim derogatory slurs; poets invent new metaphors; tech pioneers brand new digital terms; propagandists try to rewrite history. In each case, language—and with it, identity, and symbolic space—is reshaped from the ground up. Words may never 'capture' the ineffable totality of a person or a thing, but they structure the very realm in which we think, feel, and act. By selecting certain terms and weaving them into narratives, we locate ourselves within overlapping networks of meaning—familial, cultural, professional, political. Through collective agreement, these networks become fragile but real 'worlds' in which laws, roles, and values hold sway. And by the performative force of speech acts, we can continually renew or transform those worlds—redefining who we are and the symbolic spaces in which we live.

The ends of men

In 'How language shapes thought'[79] Laura Boroditsky research how language and the ways we use it shape both national identity and individual character, even rewiring our brains. Learning a new tongue, signing with our hands, changing writing direction, or shifting between handwriting, keyboard typing and touchscreen input all reorganise neural pathways—and with them the very patterns of thought, reasoning, and speech. Our brain's hardware determines how information is stored and retrieved, guiding the software of our ideas and concepts. Altering these practices can disrupt mutual understanding and quietly erode assumptions about freedom and accountability. By introducing new linguistic habits or media conventions, one can chip away at a culture's identity and foster acceptance of norms—servitude, hopelessness—that once felt alien. To undermine a society need only be to subvert its language, turning serious discourse into hollow slogans and simplistic labels. If language carves the structures of our brain, then control over words becomes control over thought itself. So, at the end Mauthner had a point. Thinking is speaking. Changing language could change the brain itself.

In 'White Mythologies' Jacques Derrida shows that metaphysics relies entirely on allegory, metaphor, and analogy, making its practitioners inadvertent poets who weave 'white mythology' from the sensuous images that underlie every abstract idea. He argues that

[79] Boroditsky L. (2011). How language shapes thought. Scientific American, 304(2), 62–65. https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0211-62

metaphysicians, who believe they escape appearances, remain bound to them by the very figures they deploy—brief, economical formulas that endlessly circulate in dense discourse. This 'fatal materialism' of vocabulary both erases what makes language vivid and wears out its own effigy, yet philosophers persist in treating their culturally specific fables as universal reason. Derrida challenges the monopoly of Western thought by asking why other mythologies should not stand alongside white mythology in our universities and public debates. He shows that words gain power through the absence of their referents—enabling us to speak of the non-existent and to shape audiences via rhetoric's figures and schemes. Gorgias, in the 'Encomium of Helen', calls speech 'a powerful master', and his notion of logos as tyrant anticipates modern studies of persuasion. Every act of meaning-making, whether promise or insult, relies on this play of presence and absence, of sound or rhythm over any fixed truth. By uncovering metaphysics as one mythology among many, Derrida insists that no interpretation or tradition can claim final authority. White mythologies unmask the cultural fables we mistake for reason, revealing that philosophy itself remains a house of poetic echoes. Recognising metaphysics as 'white mythology' frees us to embrace a plurivocal landscape of mythic reason.

The search for new mythologies follows the cycle of paradigm breakthroughs and the dynamics of ideological revolutions observed by Thomas Kuhn in 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions'. Perception in science is never theory-neutral. As Kuhn said, 'we see the world in terms of our theories', and what any of us notices depend as much on what we look at as on our prior conceptual experience. In this light, 'the answers you get depend upon the questions you ask', for every inquiry is framed by the assumptions we carry. True innovation, Kuhn argues, requires breaking with established modes of thought. All significant discoveries in science are breaks with old paradigms of thinking and speaking in academia. Those capable of such leaps are often newcomers—'very young men or very new to the field'—who, unencumbered by orthodox practice, recognise that the old rules no longer define a playable game and are free to envision a new one. Yet novelty never arrives smoothly. Every important idea in science 'sounds strange at first', and the birth of a new paradigm is met with resistance from a community convinced that 'normal science . . . knows what the world is like'. Against this backdrop of expectation, genuine novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifesting 'against a background provided by expectation', and the transition between paradigms cannot be bridged step by step. Instead, like a gestalt switch, it must occur all at once—or not at all. Far from being an impartial arbiter, science is conditioned by its own language and tradition. The conviction that 'science was conditioned by history, society, and the prejudices of scientists' helps explain why 'normal science . . . often suppresses fundamental novelties', for they threaten its basic commitments. In sum, Kuhn reminds us that our most transformative discoveries come not from incremental refinement but from radical shifts that overturn our inherited frameworks, that our very perception of reality depends on the lenses we wear, and that true scientific progress requires the courage to step beyond the familiar—even when the world insists that nothing must inevitably be accomplished. Scientific revolutions arise when entrenched theories no longer suffice, when fresh perspectives—often from those least invested in the status quo—forge new paradigms in a single decisive leap. Our vision of reality is shaped by the concepts we hold, and every act of discovery depends on the questions we dare to pose. The logic of scientific revolution is the destruction of the ruling linguistic paradigm. Novelty ideas must shatter the inertia of expectation and the biases of the community until a gestalt shift redefines the rules. Thomas Kuhn's analysis teaches that progress demands both an awareness of our own theoretical conditioning and the boldness to break with linguistic conventions that no longer serve. The only problem is that this constant destruction of the ruling ideological systems runs

out linguistic vitality and the level of trust. The logic of linguistic revolutions is that in the end devours its children. Planck's principle holds that science progresses one funeral at a time.

In his lecture[80] 'Derrida, the ends of men', Rick Roderic explores Jacques Derrida's idea of deconstruction and how text and meaning endlessly defer one another. There is nothing outside language, and every act of reading is also a misreading, an ongoing housework that never finishes. Language does not name preexisting things but stands in their absence, filling the gap between mind and reality and enabling us to speak of what does not exist. Words exist only within systems of speech that carry power and domination, and their material traces—sounds or marks—continue to disseminate meaning beyond any speaker's original intention. The deconstructive reversal reveals that the stability we seek in reference is a convenient fiction: our smartphone or our deepest thoughts are accessible only through words that always slip away from what they purport to represent. No interpretation can claim final authority; we settle instead on the reading that persuades the most people. Yet misunderstanding is not a failure but a defining feature of language. Every possibility of misreading becomes a permanent condition of our speech, and every metaphor reminds us that our world is never the thing itself but always its token. If our ends as human beings are bound up in this play of absence and interpretation, then the task is not to master language finally but to live with its limits. The ends of men emerge only within the shifting contours of our wandering words. Language can be both master and servant, but most important is its capability of self-destruction together with its host. When the language decays it is a period of moral decadence in society. Language becomes the cause of the problems that is trying to solve. The goal of philosophy and humanities then is not mastering the decaying language but getting away from it. But the tower of babble should not be abandoned or torn down only to create space for a new build. All significant breakthroughs are break -'withs' old ways of thinking, said Thomas Kuhn, but these are break with tradition and experience. The new paradigm of communication must include linguistic scepticism and critique of language. This must include respect and understanding of all the mistakes and lies from the past as part of the linguistic experience. It seems like the history of language 'is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'.

2. Nonsense and stupidity

Nonsense and irony

In 'Nonsense and Irony: Wittgenstein's Strategy of Self-Refutation and Kierkegaard's Concept of Indirect Communication'[81] Shlomy Mualem examines early Wittgenstein's self-refuting move as a way of transcending those linguistic boundaries, and it contrasts his notion of Unsinn ('nonsense') with Kierkegaard's doctrine of indirect communication and with Socratic irony. In the Preface to the Tractatus, Wittgenstein insists that the problem of 'nonsense' concerns delimiting the boundaries of language: nonsensical utterances lie beyond the realm of what can be meaningfully said. Yet by the book's conclusion he concedes that his own propositions are, strictly speaking, nonsensical. May be Wittgenstein is inconsistent in what he

[80] Roderick R. (1993). The Self Under Siege: Philosophy In The Twentieth Century, The Teaching Company

[81] Mualem, S. (2017). Nonsense and Irony: Wittgenstein's Strategy of Self-Refutation and Kierkegaard's Concept of Indirect Communication. Tópicos, Revista de Filosofía, (53), p.203. doi:https://doi.org/10.21555/top.v0i53.929.

does, or he deceives us, but his propositions do have sense. What is the sense of nonsense? The answer is 'sub specie ironiae' (under the aspect of irony). The word 'irony' derives from the ancient Greek εἰρωνεία (eirōneía), first recorded in the fifth century BCE. It originally referred to a stock figure in Old Comedy called the eiron. This character feigns ignorance or modesty, concealing his cleverness to outwit the boaster, or alazon. In its earliest uses, εἰρωνεία was essentially equivalent to deception. By the time of Plato's dialogues, however, it had taken on a subtler meaning: a calculated pretence that the listener is expected to detect. From there it evolved into our familiar sense of irony as saying the opposite of what one means—often for humour or emphasis. Wittgenstein shows that tautological propositions or the 'senseless' statements of his Tractatus lay out not reality itself but the scaffolding of language. These formulas say nothing about states of affairs and mark the boundary beyond which only nonsense can speak. In his later lectures on ethics, he argues that moral and religious claims are inherently nonsensical: they transcend any representable world and refuse to convey information. Their meaning lies not in description but in the ethical stir they awaken, a realm that lies beyond the reach of scientific language. From the Preface to the Tractatus to his private letters, Wittgenstein insists on the necessity of silence. He crafts a work that appears strictly logical yet conceals an ethical purpose—inviting readers to move past nonsensical propositions and recollect their own silent experiences of good, evil, and wonder. By refusing to state these truths directly, he employs a Socratic irony: the tension between the explicit logic of his words and the unspoken interior truths they gesture toward. Only by recognising the nonsensical and ironical nature of every proposition about value can the attentive reader grasp the work's deeper, unutterable meaning. 'The sense of nonsense' lies in its power to mark the limits of language and to awaken the silent domain of ethics that language can never fully enclose. In Proposition 6.54 of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein explains that his propositions are meant to be used as a ladder: once they have carried the reader upward, they must be discarded as nonsensical so that the world can be properly seen. By deliberately proclaiming his statements to be nonsense, Wittgenstein both delineates the limits of language and requires their transcendence—an act of self-negation characteristic of ironic discourse. This manoeuvre forces the reader to recognise, without direct instruction, that ethics and values lie beyond what can be said. In effect, Wittgenstein's 'nonsense' becomes a form of philosophical irony: it conceals the author's presence while guiding us past silence on one side and mere outward noise on the other, showing that true insight must be approached 'sub specie ironiae'.

Both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard insist on the primacy of subjective experience: each reader must become a personal we, crafting and deconstructing meaning alone rather than repeating ready-made slogans. Ethics and the good lie beyond the realm of facts, accessible only through a supernatural language that cannot be codified or taught directly. Ethics demands indirect communication and irony—concealing the speaker behind a mask so that the addressee, confronted with apparent nonsense, must transcend those propositions, recollect their own ethical moments and act independently. Irony's power lies in its tension between word and thought: by speaking the opposite of one's intent, the ironist spurs the listener into self-knowledge. This method of 'deceiving into truth' awakens infinite subjective freedom and challenges us to climb and discard each nonsensical rung until we glimpse reality aright. These ethical revolutions remind us that ultimate certainty belongs neither to abstract systems nor to universal truths alone but must be balanced by our personal, temporal perspectives. Right here, right now, each of us must affirm a truth that lives in time and place, shaped by our own minds. By proclaiming nonsense and wielding irony, we confront the boundary of common language

and summon our singular moral insight—affirming that real understanding dawns only when words themselves fall silent.

Kierkegaard sees irony as indirect communication, where true intentions and subjective truths lie hidden beneath surface claims. Irony warns us: do not heed my words even as I speak them. Unlike science's direct transmission of objective knowledge, irony aims at existential transformation—nudging the listener toward self-reflection and personal awakening without spelling out its message. In religion and ethics, this means guiding others to practice what they already know inwardly, using midwifery rather than didactic instruction: the speaker conceals, the addressee uncovers. Communication divides into three modes: transmission of information, establishment of community, and transformation of mind—ironically serving the highest goal of existential change. By minimising the speaker's presence, irony forces the listener to wrestle with meaning alone, 'deceiving into truth'. Socratic irony feigns ignorance to expose another's assumptions, while Talleyrand quipped that 'Speech was given to man to disguise his thoughts'. True irony speaks the opposite of its literal meaning, layering humour, paradox, or mockery over serious intent. This tension between word and thought affirms our infinite freedom: by tearing away irony's veil, we glimpse a reality beyond language's limits. Irony's negative metaphysics—pointing to something positive only through negation—reminds us that ethical and religious choices cannot be dictated but must be freely seized by everyone. Proclaiming nonsense through irony becomes a sublime art of concealment and revelation, inviting us to discover our own truths behind the mask of words.

Wittgenstein opens by reminding us that this is no mere textbook but an invitation to uncover the thoughts already dwelling within us. Its purpose is to expose the misunderstandings of our linguistic logic and to mark the boundary between what can be spoken clearly and what must be passed over in silence. To draw this limit, we must learn to think the unthinkable—knowing that beyond the frontier of expression lies only nonsense. Having believed he had solved philosophy's great problems, Wittgenstein confesses that the book's real achievement is to show how small a gain even their solutions represent. He insists that ethical propositions cannot convey the highest values: ethics stands outside the world of facts, transcendent like the aesthetic, and questions without words have no answers—and vice versa. When every scientific question is resolved, life's deeper problems remain untouched until they disappear, revealing their vanishing as the only true solution. These mystical realities make themselves manifest without needing language. Wittgenstein's method is one of silent demonstration: by restricting ourselves to what can be said, we quietly reveal the emptiness of metaphysical claims dressed up in scientific garb. In doing so, we guide others to recognise for themselves the point where language dissolves and philosophy gives way to silence. The silence of philosophy is a result of the impossibility of being propositions of ethics. Words can express nothing that is higher. Ethics is transcendental and cannot be put into words. When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question. If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it. Doubt can exist only where a question is asked. Even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain untouched.

Invasion of the words

James Joyce urged us to seize language for ourselves: to coin unfamiliar terms, assign fresh meanings and fashion a tongue all our own. Thomas Hobbes warned that powerful minds conquer words effortlessly, while weaker ones become ensnared by them. The true goal is to invade the words. Truth and falsehood belong only to speech—silence carries neither; it simply

is. True wisdom springs not from books but from reading the people who write them, discerning in their pages the shifting tides of our hopes and fears. Too often, we fall into idle chatter just to fill the air, as though keeping a conversation open at an airport gate could mask the fact that the end is always near. In tough times, hard people turn to history, hoping its tales will ready us for danger or lend control over the present. Yet if we recorded every moment—walking the streets with a 360° camera—we would lose ourselves in a loop of retelling, with no time left to live. Life demands first-hand experience; everything else is a second-order reflection. We prefer metaphors, theories, and images to the raw immediacy of people and places—and even to ourselves. We study our mirror-images, our photographs, our histories laid out like a resting ground for the past. But metaphors are lifeless; history is a cemetery. We return to them only because they hold the triggers that prompt certain reactions in us. To truly live—and to free our minds—we must invade the words, break their hold, and step beyond history's cemetery into the living moment.

Inner dialogue. Your mind buzzes with voices—echoes of parents, teachers, peers, and critics—all competing for attention. To make this chatter work for you, first ask three questions: attribution—are these voices sincerely yours or borrowed? Ego syntony—do they convey care, empathy, and genuine concern for your well-being? Fuzziness—are they clear and focused, or vague and confusing? A healthy inner dialogue becomes a constructive narrative, a story in which your life unfolds with purpose. That story's plot should meet eight criteria: 1. all-inclusive: it leaves no blind spots, accounting for every fact and feeling; 2. coherent: it links events in clear, causal chains where each moment naturally leads to the next; 3. logically compatible: it obeys sound reasoning without lapsing into contradictory or tyrannical dogmas; 4. insightful: it illuminates your own patterns, inspires awe and reveals a unique path rather than a one-size-fits-all formula; 5. aesthetic: it feels beautiful and smooth, simple yet rich, requiring the fewest assumptions for the greatest clarity; 6. explanatory: it makes sense of your choices and predicts future challenges, serving as a therapeutic guide for growth; 7. authentic: it emerges from your silent core—steady like a rock—needing no external applause or validation; 8. elastic: it reshapes itself as you learn and grow, rewiring your mind with new data while preserving its essential structure. Your life's narrative is your personal science, a theory of you that adapts, heals, and guides. By tuning your inner dialogue to meet these standards, you transform the constant racket in your head into a coherent, compassionate, and creative force.

Change your inner dialogue. Sam Vaknin. Inside your mind, a constant chorus debates every move: the voices of parents, teachers, authority figures and peers mingle with echoes of critics and abusers. Your ego becomes a crowded theatre where values clash, beliefs contradict and every assumption is under siege. You perform this inner racket behind a calm exterior, wrestling in silence over what to say, whom to please and what you stand to gain—or lose. These ever-present memories shape a core personality you believe immutable, yet healing begins by tuning that dialogue. First, tell yourself: be somebody—an individual so distinctive that you cannot be divided or forgotten. Plant legacies in your wake; craft ideas worth quoting, lives worth remembering. Even a single phrase can outlive you if spoken with conviction. By rewriting the voices in your head, you reclaim your story—changing your inner dialogue is the first step to changing your life.

Psychopaths are those who refuse to play society's game, offering an outsider's perspective on its endless manipulations and propaganda. To them, the rules are arbitrary: we can remake the game, or ignore it altogether. Yet this freedom comes at a cost. They lack the

inner reservations that check normal behaviour, feel no empathy, and will push boundaries mercilessly—often at the expense of those who still believe in fair play. Their world is a shared delusion, a cruel asylum in which every move can turn dangerous. Recognising this, we can reject the voices society has planted in our minds without sliding into psychopathic detachment. True authenticity lies in embracing a form of nothingness—silencing the implants of expectation and rediscovering our own values. This is not rebellion defined by what we oppose, but a quiet self-possession. We forge meaning through genuine connections, knowing that society's worth is measured by how we treat each other and the small communities we build. Psychopaths show us that if life is a game, it need not be played by their rules—only by those we choose to honour.

A person is an individual human being, named from the Latin persona—originally the mask of an actor's assumed role. In modern usage, personage denotes someone of rank or distinction, invested with personal power and social presence. To become truly 'a person', you must invent your own worldview—a private theory that no laboratory test can prove or falsify. Its value lies not in scientific validation but in inspiring others to create their own narratives. Unlike a hypothesis, it requires no experiments, offers no objective truth value, and belongs to a realm beyond double-blind trials. Behaviourism once tried to reduce the inner life to measurable phenomena, but every test alters its subject, traumatic protocols skew results, and no two individuals are interchangeable. Psychology is therefore more an art of storytelling than a hard science, celebrating each person's unique perspective. Your aim is to shape a healthy inner dialogue—one that fosters happiness, harmony with yourself, and lasting calm. This self-crafted narrative becomes the organising principle of your mind, generating inner order, justice, and empathy. Through its cathartic power, you purge destructive voices of guilt, fear, and hatred, replacing them with constructive purpose and genuine connection. A person is not merely a social mask but the author of their own inner story, finding identity and peace through the narrative they choose to live by.

You are nothing but a story. A powerful phrase can absolve you of the harsh voices inside your head—voices that tell you that you are unworthy, sinful, inferior, guilty, alienated or self-loathing. When you embrace that phrase, those judgments fall away. Your mind feels cleansed, organised, integrated. You forgive yourself. Through a kind of dramatic therapy—a mental crucifixion and resurrection—you atone for past mistakes, write your own Bible, and become your own god. You learn to make peace with yourself, to harness your existence, and to unite the warring voices in your skull into a single, clear voice—your own. This is the heart of narrative therapy: your self-story must be self-efficacious, an evolutionary adaptation in the linguistic jungle. Rather than drowning in endless words, you strip your narrative down to its essentials—simple, direct, tribal. When your story falters, you use psychodrama to rehearse a new script, reclaim authorship of your life, and ask: Who am I? What characters do I create? Who shapes my destiny, my values, my language? Only you can answer these questions. You devise your own solutions, rooted in your values, choices, and history. You are nothing but a story—a dream, a script, a movie. And if that is all you are, you can rewrite yourself at any moment. Trust your power to recast your narrative and become someone new. Since you are nothing but a story, take up the pen—and start writing.

'The Conference of the Birds'

In Attar of Nishapur poem 'The Conference of the Birds', the world's birds convene to choose a sovereign, for none lives among them. The hoopoe, wise guide, proposes a quest for

the legendary Simorgh. Each bird embodies a human flaw that blocks enlightenment, and together they must traverse seven treacherous valleys: the Valley of Quest, where all beliefs and doubts are cast aside; Love, where reason yields to passion; Knowledge, where worldly learning proves useless; Detachment, where desire and 'reality' evaporate; Unity, where all distinctions dissolve into the Beloved's oneness; Wonderment, in which awe reveals how little we truly know; and Poverty and Annihilation, where the self-melts into eternity. Terror grips them at the outset—many fall by drought, beasts, or panic—until only thirty remain at Simorgh's throne. There they discover the ultimate riddle: 'Simorgh' in Persian means 'thirty birds', and the divine they sought is their own reflected image, like sunlight revealed by a mirror. When the face of Simorgh is unveiled, you see that 'the birds…are but the shadows cast by that unveiling. What shadow is ever separated from its maker?' Thus we learn to look beyond surfaces and into the mystery of unity. Just as the hoopoe leads the birds into hidden valleys, language can both guide and entrap us. Planned obsolescence—or its unplanned decay—turns speech into madness, empty slogans and instruments of power that concentrate wealth and obedience. Words become command lines, reducing 'us' to automatons who follow without reflection. In 'The Conference of the Birds', the journey toward Simorgh mirrors our own pilgrimage through language's valleys—until we recognise that mastery over words must give way to the silent unity that transcends all separation. In the valleys, every word loses its fixed meaning, and only in silence does their purpose become clear. To see the Simorgh is to see oneself no longer as a speaker or listener, but as shadow and source, dissolving in the same light. Thus, the task is not to dominate language, but to pass through it—until it vanishes—and we reach what lies beyond words.

What lies before words? How do the birds unite without a conference? Paul MacLean's triune brain model describes three nested layers of our mind. The deepest, the reptilian complex, comes hardwired at birth to secure survival and gene reproduction—so primal that it even underlies our sense of beauty, whispering to each of us a private ideal that needs no public approval. It is ancient, hardwired, and indifferent to words. It acts before thinking, driven by survival, territory, and reproduction. Yet this primitive layer carries within it the silent outlines of beauty, a sense of rightness beyond articulation—a whisper that echoes the birds' initial call to seek Simorgh, a call deeper than reason. Layered above is the limbic system, the emotional brain of early mammals, where passion and fear, love and loss, carve paths in feeling. Above it lies the limbic system, a construct of early mammals that craves instant gratification, tribal belonging, and ritual; here the logic of emotions—love and hate, reward, and pain—rules, forging the networks that bind us. Crowning these is the neocortex, which only takes shape through learning after infancy. It plans for the distant future, wields abstract tools of thought and exercises restraint on our basest drives, yet offers weaker rewards than instinct or passion. Our cultures act as reprogramming scripts for these layers. Archetypes of childhood and love are inventions designed to ensure our survival, and every society negotiates four cardinal needs—sex, security, success, and sustenance—shaping destinies of triumph or failure. But we remain tribal at heart, belonging to communities of around 150 people rather than sprawling nations. Tribes will keep moving, balancing the reptilian urges, the emotional ties, and the rational visions without locking into rigid, crystalline dogmas. The triune brain model reveals how each layer rules us in turn—and how only by honouring their interplay can we rise above mere instinct to achieve true balance.

The word 'conference' means 'act of consulting together', from Latin conferens, present participle of conferre 'to bring together; deliberate, talk over', literally 'to bring together', from

assimilated form of com 'together' and ferre 'to bear, carry'. Meaning 'formal meeting for consultation, discussion, instruction, exchange of opinions, etc'., is from 1580s. If the language as a nation building instrument creates larger communities, then what is the limit of this exponent growth? There must be an intrinsic kill switch hidden in the language and the culture it creates. What is the purpose of a culture? What if the culture exists to soothe the anxieties that our own language and social systems create, offering us patterns of behaviour in which we feel comfortable, respected, and valued. These anxieties arise from the large scale of human communities created with linguistic strategies as religions and ideologies. At its heart, culture is a form of collective linguistic grooming—a shared codes of gestures, words and rituals that reassures us we belong to the right circle and are performing the right acts. In today's interconnected world, a new global codes of universal values are emerging. This codes helps explain why groups of people everywhere buy the same products and adopt the same lifestyles, even as they maintain local traditions. We can easily see these codes at work in language. You cannot believe what people say. Most people do not know why they do will want the things they do or why they say the things they say. If you stop and think. It is mostly grooming yourself, your inner voices, and others. Emotion is the energy required to learn and remember anything. That is why news are shocking. First incite anger and just add little info. The structure of speech, not the information, is the message. Speech affects not only isolated individuals, but people with their dependencies and relationships. The space between people is filled with words as promises, pledges, vows, oaths, agreements, commitments, and contracts. Language creates a linguistic kingship as a structure of a much bigger tribe. The big society is based on conventiuon and agreement about the meaning of words. The difference from the tribe is that these words are separated from concrete men and women and can be used, copied, and send as commands in a system. The name of the sender or the institution is enough. No longer a personal authority and responsibility is needed. In big society words become like paper money, a type of negotiable promissory note that is payable to the bearer on demand. To access the meaning of a linguistic 'imprint' within a particular culture, you must learn the code for that word. By revealing these mechanisms, you can map the cultural unconscious—how entire groups in societies think, behave, and speak in predictable patterns. Culture, then, is both the lens through which we see the world and the script by which we live our lives. The purpose of a culture is to unite us through shared words, codes, and rituals, transforming individual anxieties into collective belonging. How we think is the actual process of the creating of the idea of 'we' as first-person plural pronoun. This abstract meaning of 'we' is outside the clan where everybody personally knows the others. If you want to join, it must think and speak the same. You must follow how ow we behave and speak as a group in predictable patterns. Society usually tells you to do something with your life. To 'do something with your life' has come to mean shedding your true self and molding yourself into the image society demands. Including meeting expectations, adopting its values, and playing by its reward system. Doing the right thing includes speaking in predictable patterns. Behaving and acting is also important but difficult to observe and control.

The battle for your words

The early meaning of the word 'individual' from 15c. is 'one and indivisible, inseparable' with reference to the Trinity, from Latin individuus 'indivisible'. Individuation, in the context of psychology, refers to the process of integrating the psyche to form a unified self. It is a journey of becoming a unique individual, distinct from others, including the language and thinking. This is the greatest danger of the society, and any language is a watchdog against

individuation. The path to individuation is not deconstruction of societal language but invading the ready-made words for your own purpose. Every society thrives on consensus and creates official language with rules as an obstacle to dissent. Language of society is a bondage for the individual. Language may be our home but also can be your jail. Every member speaking the language must be inseparable from the abstract linguistic tribe called society, nation, ethnos, people etc. Our social identity is based on a collective verdict issued by parents, peers, teachers, and distant onlookers alike. Each voice invading your inner dialogue to channel you toward conformity. Speaking publicly creates your persona in society and can be easily faked for the difference from behaviour. Speaking is the main part of our social behaviour. Even a small circle can impose its will, and media amplifies the game of relative positioning—measuring your worth against others in a way that fuels anxiety, depression, and the spiral of silence. This pressure to conform, or 'egosyntonic', collides with the promise of 'egodystonic', trapping you in a cycle where failure is built into the very language that spurs you on. Your own dreams, compulsions, desires conflict with the ideal self-image of your social persona. Every unattainable bar is set by external voices, so you keep striving, working, contributing at the cost of your own authenticity. To truly do something with your life, you must silence the chorus of borrowed expectations and chart your own course. Finding your own voice means finding or creating your own meaning and even own language. But what comes next? Is it possible to live outside the societal codes? To reshape your own world, one must build on simple, universal values like safety, health, and security. Words should have people behind them. People need to stand by their word. Respect for the words of authority must be based on experience, not on faceless institutions or celebrity power. Speech should be used to unite rather than radicalise, to speak truth instead of chasing headlines. People live adrift in a virtual fog of endless connections without content or structure, fed hollow promises that stoke paranoia and perpetual anxiety. Abstract speech thrives on this chaos, engineering fear so that only the most paranoid feel safe. As machines grow smarter, human operators grow duller—lost amid bubbles of empty interaction. Only by restoring real bonds, nurturing communal values, and resisting the noise of engineered dissent can we chart what comes next. What comes next is a return to human values and personal responsibility—a world where connection means human care, not just cold data.

The battle for your mind takes place on linguistic fields. The battle of words begins with the realisation that most conflicts arise from failed communication—yet today communication itself is the problem. We live in the first over-communicated society, where each year we flood the airwaves with more messages and understand less. This is a failure of language before everything else. A new paradigm of communication is needed. Mass media, marketing and advertising are the perfect testing ground for communication theories. If a strategy works in ads, it will work in politics, religion, or any field that requires moving masses. But this saturation breeds oversimplified slogans, narrow targets, endless segmentation, and nonstop repetition. In such a world, only the paranoid survives. We mistakenly treat words as if they carried fixed, intrinsic meanings. Words are empty containers—triggers for the opinions, wishes and beliefs we already harbour. To influence thought, you must pick the precise terms that awaken the buried ideas you need. Alfred Korzybski taught that a sane mind fits opinions to facts, while the insane force facts to fit opinions. Twisting reality to suit our views is far easier than changing our preconceptions. Emotions, too, originate within; external signals merely unleash feelings we already possess. Mastering communication means learning how to spark and steer those inner currents. Always seek facts to test your beliefs, consult experts who reinforce sound reasoning, and remember that language is the mind’s currency. We think in

words—ready-made tools that we must learn and then wield deliberately. True speech rejects the chaos of empty noise and reclaims language as a precision instrument—aligning facts to minds through carefully chosen words. External stimuli just trigger emotions, but they are created inside you. Being human is to know how to learn how to trigger emotion and to control them. The choice of words can influence the thinking process itself. To think conceptually, you manipulate words. Language is the currency of the mind.

Every new slogan seeks to occupy the empty spaces in our consciousness, racing to stake its claim on that open hole before any rival can name it. A slogan is nothing more than a name, a logo, or an image; the meaning itself is merely incidental. Once the void is filled, language nurture a dependence, inventing needs that feel essential. But as every corner of the mind becomes claimed, it must expand the universe of words and manufacture new cavities to fill. Traditional linguistics has lost its creative edge—it now serves mostly to maintain established ideas. Critique of language, by contrast, builds them from scratch. It feels authentic, reaches people more deeply and introduce fresh meanings. To make ideas catch on, we must tap into social currency—sharing content that boosts our own standing or creates insider status. Language criticism is not an antilanguage, but revitalisation. Successful stories hide their true agenda in broader narratives, like Trojan horses, so that they spread organically and carry value. Smart communicators embed triggers—little cues that bring a message to mind repeatedly—fuel emotional engagement and leave behind a behavioural residue that sticks long after the first encounter. By weaving these elements together—first owning a mental niche, then sustaining it through authentic storytelling and social dynamics—we win not just fleeting attention but a permanent foothold in people's thoughts. The battle for our mind is won not through louder ads but by claiming mental territory, nurturing genuine narratives, and harnessing the social forces that embed ideas in our collective consciousness.

There are multiple realities that compete for truth and legitimacy. Everyday experiences push us to sort life into broad categories that carry shared meanings for ourselves and others. But our conversations do more than exchange news—they perform 'reality maintenance', reinforcing a communal version of the world through linguistic grooming. What might sound like pointless small talk is really a ritual of mutual validation, ensuring that everyone's inner map of reality stays coordinated and consent to what counts as true remains intact. Free language can easily start truth deconstruction, so it is carefully gated. True rebellion starts with language criticism, and every war starts with propaganda. Scientific revolutions create new language of abstract terminology and political movements create ideologically charged newspeak. That is why this reality maintenance is crucial in moments of generational shift or social upheaval, when competing worldviews collide, and the symbolic universe can no longer self-legitimate. Elites deploy theology, science, and ideology to stabilise the prevailing order, but when contradictory ideas become widespread, the old reality unravels, and new realities vie for acceptance. Revolutions begin not with weapons but with the breakdown of shared meaning. Gone is the notion of a single objective truth waiting to be discovered. Instead, our world is shaped by multiple, overlapping realities—each sustained by its own language, rituals, and institutions—and each striving for the authority to define what we must believe. When competing realities vie for legitimacy, our only choice is to recognise their constructed nature—and decide for ourselves which truths we will uphold.

'Language' does not exist!

In the 'The linguistic turn'(1967) Richard Rorty ushered the idea that language does not simply mirror an external world but actively constructs the realities we inhabit. From this perspective, there can be many competing, even contradictory, 'worlds' or inner experiences, each maintained through its distinctive discourse. A discourse, in turn, sets the social boundaries that determine which statements may be made about any topic and shapes the practices by which individuals imbue reality with shared meaning. Symbolic interactionism builds on this insight by examining how people use common symbols and language in both intra- and interpersonal communication to forge collective understandings. In daily encounters, we constantly negotiate and reaffirm the meanings that guide our actions, and society emerges not as an abstract entity but as the sum of these ongoing interactions. In this view society is something ephemeral that is only emerging if a critical mass of members plays the language game. Words become powerful symbolic tools that influence behaviour precisely because we all agree—often unconsciously—to use them in the same way within our social context. The linguistic turn teaches us that by reshaping our discourse and symbols, we reshape the very realities we live by. The crucial question in the genealogy of this ephemeral 'we' is who controls the language and specifically the meaning of the words?

In the 'Mind, Self and Society'(1931) George Herbert Mead defines the mind as our capacity to use symbols and through language and thought to assign meaning to the world. The self is our ability to reflect on how others perceive us, and society is the virtual space where these symbolic interactions occur. Mead's framework rests on three core assumptions: that meaning emerges through communication, that our self-concept motivates our actions, and that a unique, reciprocal relationship binds individuals and their society. He offers three premises: we act toward things based on the meanings we give them; those meanings arise from our interactions with others; and we continually reinterpret and adjust them as we engage with the world. Thinking itself is an 'inner conversation' or 'minding', a dialogue born only after we have mastered symbolic interaction. By taking another's role, we see through their eyes and enrich our shared social reality. But a fourth premise might be added: we are driven by an innate desire for psychological rewards from social engagement, prompting us to shape realities filtered through collective exchange. After this work, we realise our world has shifted—our shared meanings remade by the very conversations that sustain them. But what is society—this aggregate of our interactions—and what is language? Are they a group voice, a chorus of inner selves, or simply an empty code until individuals breathe life into it? Societies and languages have no independent existence; they are conceptual constructs—collections of individuals bound by common practices, rules, and authorities. Social reality is complex but fleeting sum of all interactions. Even wars exist only as ideas; the only concrete reality is the many lives affected. 'Mind, Self and Society' teaches that our inner voices, language, and social structures co-create each other—revealing that the realities we live by are nothing more and nothing less than the stories we continually tell together. It is up to us to tell a different stories if we dare.

In a 1987 interview, Margaret Thatcher argued that appeals to 'society' merely mask individual responsibility: 'There is no such thing. There are individual men and women and there are families, and no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first'. Decades later, Boris Johnson[82] stressed that 'there really is such a thing as

[82] PA Media (2020). There is such a thing as society, says Boris Johnson from bunker. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/mar/29/20000-nhs-staff-return-to-service-johnson-says-from-coronavirus-isolation.

society' when he thanked pharmacists, NHS workers and volunteers, urging everyone, 'One thing I think the coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society'. He assumed a collective existence in the face of clear and present danger—the very idea Thatcher had dismissed. This clash raises a deeper question: does society have an objective reality of its own? Émile Durkheim answered with a resolute yes. He described society as a sui generis phenomenon, irreducible to the individuals who compose it. Through shared beliefs, rituals and communications, individual consciences fuse into a synthetic whole—a constructed, 'artificial' reality that exerts its own pressures and possibilities, shaping behaviour in ways no single person could. Society may not be tangible like a person or a family, but it is an artificial reality born of our shared language. The shared convention about the meaning of the words has the power to shape us into society and to create the feeling of 'we'. This collective consciousness can feel as real as any law of nature. So may society and language does not exist, but 'we' are using them well.

In his article 'Why there is no such thing as society should not be regarded with moral revulsion?'[83] Hugh McLahlan is making an interesting linguistic observation among other topics. Words are not things. When it comes to language and words we often judge emotionally. Saying that there is no such thing as society does not cancel society but incites moral reaction. This is the main effect of language. Instead of making things with words it is to provoke emotions. Like making people angry with words. Society is a shared belief that is protected fiercely. A tribe or even big family clan exists not only as individual members but as a wholeness of personally connected people. But British society is just a provisionality. Of course, society does not exist, but also language, nation, public, people, and humanity. They are all conventions. Just words with fleeting meaning that is working for a certain time and place. Society lives only in the shared agreements of its members—agreements about the meaning of words, symbols, and roles. It exists not for its own sake but to serve individuals, helping each person find themselves rather than lose themselves. In practice, society is a linguistic creation: a collective name, a set of uniforms and behaviours, a conspicuous performance of a shared story that is, at root, pure fiction. This fiction takes the form of a social contract signed by countless minds, a system not of perfect harmony but of controlled dissent. We speak our common interests into being, then enforce them with commands and conventions. Human groups naturally cap out at around 150 individuals—the band whose voices can all be heard—beyond which our public sphere fragments. Mass media then scales this acoustic boundary, forging abstract consent among audiences who never meet. Etymologically, society comes from the Latin 'socius'—companion or ally—and originally meant fellowship or alliance. By the mid-16th century, it had come to denote any association united by purpose, and by the 17th, a community aware of living together in order. The term even evolved to signify the 'cultivated' circles of fashion by the 19th century. Yet through every shift, society remains a construct of language, an alliance of companions bound not by blood or substance but by the stories they tell and retell. Because society exists only in our shared words and agreements, when those words dissolve, society itself vanishes—proving that in reality, 'society does not exist'.

[83] McLachlan, H. (2020). Why ‘there’s no such thing as society’ should not be regarded with moral revulsion. [online] The Conversation. Available at: https://theconversation.com/why-theres-no-such-thing-as-society-should-not-be-regarded-with-moral-revulsion-136008.

Public opinion does not exist. When we speak, we inevitably offer an opinion—so wrote Plato—yet three assumptions underlie every exchange: that anyone can hold an opinion, that all opinions carry equal weight, and that posing a question signals there is no shared sense of which questions truly matter. In reality, 'public opinion' is always mobilised by crisis or conflict, forcing us to choose among the voices deemed authoritative in our own circles. We adopt the views of the powerful within our group, repeat slogans until they feel self-evident, and conform to the endless chorus of agreement. This manufactured unity—'the power of many'—masks the fact that no opinion is truly neutral; the dominant ideas always reflect the interests of those who shape the conversation. Society claims to rest on consent, yet consent itself is a narrative we collectively tell, not an objective truth. Opinion, at its root, is conjecture—a belief we cherish and defend, born of trust or desire rather than evidence. When we speak of 'public opinion', we invoke a single, coherent voice that in fact never exists apart from the turbulent mix of individual judgments, repeated refrains, and power dynamics. Because what we call public opinion is really a patchwork of competing, interest-driven perspectives, 'public opinion does not exist' as a unified reality—only as the illusion we create through language and ritualised agreement.

The meaning of society? Society begins as companionship—a fellowship of allies whose bonds are forged in language and shared purpose. In the 12th century, French société and Latin societas spoke of friendly association and union, rooted in socius, 'companion'. By the 1540s, society meant any group gathered for a specific purpose; a century later, it had broadened to denote the people of a community bound by residence and mutual awareness. By the 19th century it even signified the cultivated elite whose manners and fashions set the tone for others. A company, too, grew from 'bread-fellowship', a circle of messmates sharing sustenance, to a commercial association of craftspeople and merchants by the 14th century, and later to any body of persons united for business or comfort. A tribe was at first one of the twelve divisions of ancient Israel or Rome, but from the 16th century it labeled any ethnic or social clan under a recognised head. Race entered English in the 16th century as lineage, a stock of common descent, though ironically its roots lie not in Latin radix ('root') but in later French razza. By the 18th century it denoted broad human divisions—an imprecise taxonomy that modern anthropology still debates. Stock, from the Old English stocc, began as a tree trunk but came to mean line of descent and family ancestry, the living 'stem' of kinship. Community, from Latin communitas and Old French comunité, originally signified the quality of shared fellowship. By the 14th century it had come to mean people united by locality or common interest, a public commons of living ties and mutual obligations. Across centuries these terms have traced the arc of human connection: from intimate alliances around bread and kin to sprawling assemblies shaped by law, commerce, and culture. Each word—from society and company to tribe, race, stock, and community—reveals a facet of how we bind ourselves together in stories we call our common life. The meaning of society is never fixed; it survives only in the living agreements we renew with every act of companionship and shared purpose.

Language like society is also a synthetic reality. Emile Durkheim taught us that social facts—those ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist beyond any one individual—shape our lives as powerfully as physical laws. Society, he argued, is the ultimate social fact, a collective force that moulds behaviour and thought. Language, too, functions as a synthetic reality: it emerges from countless interactions, holds its own causal weight, and governs what we can conceive and express. As David Graeber reminds us, both society and language are human inventions, capable of being reshaped. From the seventeenth century Michel de

Montaigne's insistence that we must 'interpret interpretation' to Nietzsche's declaration that 'there are no facts, only interpretations', thinkers have exposed the constructed nature of our world. In 1922 Walter Lippmann warned that the 'real environment' is too vast and fleeting for direct grasp, so each of us lives within a 'pseudo-environment'—a personal fiction, assembled from cultural narratives and social conventions. This social constructivism shows that much of what we take for reality is a collective creation: shared meanings and structures that guide our perceptions and actions. We do not simply absorb language; we reproduce it, invest it with value, and so make it real. If language is a synthetic reality as malleable as society itself, then by understanding its constructed roots we unlock the power to reconstruct our shared world.

Open society and its language

In his 'Open Society' 1932 Henri Bergson coined the term 'open society' to describe a dynamic system grounded in universalism, standing in stark contrast to the closed societies bound by fixed laws—linguistic, moral, religious, or legal. But can it be an open language in an allegedly open society? Is it possible for the language to be open and to sustain a stable society? Even when civilisations vanish, the instincts that define inclusion and exclusion endure. Universalism, as a meta-ethical stance is seen in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which sets moral standards for all humanity. But is there a universal language that can explain and support these moral standards? Max Weber and later Talcott Parsons insisted that social phenomena must be traced back to the intentions of individuals—a doctrine known as methodological individualism, which underlies much social science. When social 'laws' prescribe how people ought to think, reason is abused in the service of power. Much of the social 'facts' are opinions and conventions, accessible only through language and collective dialogue, never as direct observations. Friedrich Hayek, in 'The Counter-Revolution of Science', and Popper, in 'The Poverty of Historicism' and 'The Open Society and Its Enemies', both defended the rule of critical inquiry against any system claiming ultimate answers. But this desire to prevent the slide into collectivism and totalitarianism can easily result in miscommunication. Both the humanities and natural sciences share methods of causal explanation and privileging individual action can be a misleading language game. Game theory's prisoner's dilemma and Olson's logic of collective action later demonstrated that even shared interests do not guarantee cooperation—public choice requires influencers, pressure groups and the strategic formation of opinions. Throughout, the lesson holds: society, like language, is an artificial construct—an open system that thrives only when we preserve the freedom to question its assumptions, reshape its rules and protect the rights of individuals against any forced unanimity. A true open society will eventually fall to its open language. Free speech that continually questions societal conventions, empowers destructive individual thought, and resists any effort to close the circle of consent. Even the open society must control and close its language if it is to survive.

Linguistic wars are fought in the fields of academia for control over language. In the 1960s and 1970s, American theoretical linguistics saw its own civil war when Noam Chomsky's generative grammar collided with the generative semantics of his former students—Paul Postal, John Ross, George Lakoff and James McCawley, sometimes dubbed the Four Horsemen. Chomsky held that an underlying syntactic deep structure drives meaning, while the generative semanticists argued the reverse: that deep structures themselves are semantic objects shaping surface syntax. This dispute gave birth to distinct paradigms, from cognitive linguistics—where language learning hinges on memory, perception, and categorisation—to

ever more abstract theories of deep and surface structure. Nearly sixty years later, we confront a new language battlefield. In our post-truth era, left and right seem to speak different tongues, locked in endless repetition of slogans. Meaning has collapsed under the weight of simplified sound bites, yet indirect and figurative speech still carries hidden signals for those tuned to context. Small, vested-interest groups now engineer linguistic change as naturally as currents carve a riverbed, and in times of conflict we learn to watch our words as carefully as our weapons. Around the globe, disputes over linguistic minority rights, over whether a speech form is a language or merely a dialect, are resolved not by phonology but by politics—'a language is a dialect with an army and navy', as Max Weinreich observed. Governments promote or suppress tongues according to power, for if speech makes us right, might makes that speech prevail. When words become weapons, we must remember that the true battleground is not syntax or semantics but the space where power and persuasion meet—and that only by reclaiming meaning can one side hope to win the linguistic war.

The pronouncement that 'language is closed'—that its meanings must be regulated, fixed, and controlled, even within so-called open societies—was met with resistance, yet also reflected a broader cultural unease. When a prominent declaration once claimed that theoretical engagement in the humanities had ended and 'theory is dead', responses revealed anything but consensus. Many acknowledged a diminishing influence and affirmed the abstraction of theoretical language and intellectual life. Far from being obsolete, theoretical discourse is seen as an enduring source of societal change. The control of reality is linguistic and the language in society is closed. Since the mid-1990s, a series of books has declared the supposed end of theory, each with titles suggesting closure or aftermath: 'Post-Theory', 'After Theory', 'Life After Theory', among others. These works vary in tone—some denounce theoretical abstraction, while others interpret 'after' as a form of maturity, not death. Most contributors agree, however, that theory deepened our understanding of culture and that any return to pre-theoretical, purely empirical methods would be both impossible and undesirable. Yet they also admit uncertainty about what theoretical inquiry now means or where it should go. This uncertainty coincides with a deeper ideological transformation. As societies embrace allegedly open values, their discursive space paradoxically narrows. What masquerades as pluralism is often the rigid policing of meaning, the closure of interpretation, and the regulation of language in the name of universality. The critique of theory becomes a symptom of this deeper drive: the desire not to question meaning but to stabilise it. Thus, the proclamation that 'language is closed' reflects the attempt to restrict the plasticity of thought and reimpose control in the face of semantic instability. Some writers have attempted to rescue or redirect theoretical language by re-engaging with questions sidelined during the era of postmodern playfulness—truth, ethics, religion, mortality. These efforts replace linguistic opacity with more direct expression, stripping away layers of jargon and reintroducing philosophical figures once deemed passé. They shift the terrain from endless textual play to moral and existential substance. But while they reorient the agenda, they rarely offer coherent new visions. They rehearse old debates under new rhetorical conditions, never quite resolving whether theory has ended, transformed, or simply returned in disguised forms.

The control of meaning in the post-theoretical age is nothing else than fear of real change in the structure of society. The supposed decline of theoretical language is just a planned obsolescence aimed in endless cycle of referral and postponed social action. Theoretical language explores the fading influence of deconstruction, endlessly reframing popular culture and mass media. Still, what emerges is not a unified alternative but a multiplicity of proposals—

performatism, hypermodernity, critical modernism—that try to outlive postmodernism without fully escaping it. These paradigms are more diagnostic than generative; they describe what has been rather than invent what could be. The loss of postmodernism's vitality is sensed less in theoretical argument than in cultural production. Sounds, videos, and texts that mimic its strategies now appear stale, their intertextual games collapsing under repetition. The exhaustion of aesthetic experimentation—sequels, remakes, referential irony—suggests not failure of execution but the end of a cultural moment. Still, no definitive break is identified. The notion that postmodernism has died, like the claim that theory has ended, is itself shaped by fatigue, nostalgia, and the longing for conceptual closure. What follows postmodernism is not liberation but regulation. After a short break language must be closed again. The rhetorical openness once championed by theory now yields to a managed discourse, where meanings are policed in the name of progress and inclusivity. The end of theory is not an intellectual event but a political symptom: an era where language, even in a so-called open society, is rendered closed. It must no longer call for action but produce endless interpretation, confirm consensus, shield sensibility, and enforce the boundaries of expression. Thus, the cultural atmosphere is not post-theoretical, but post-critical and post-active—saturated with inherited gestures from theory but emptied of their disruptive potential. In this controlled environment, the struggle is no longer between competing theories but between the remnants of linguistic freedom and the creeping closure of meaning itself. The post-active theory became an organised stupidity.

Linguistic stupidity

The term 'stupid' derives from Latin stupere, 'to be stunned or numb', and originally designated the comic 'fall guy' of Roman mimes. By 1541 'stupid' and 'stupidity' had entered English as pejoratives alongside 'fool', 'idiot', and 'dumb', applied to those deemed incapable of learning or reason. Stupidity in speech is marked by mental sluggishness and senseless utterances, a hesitancy or muddle that betrays an impaired capacity to think or express ideas clearly. In modern usage 'stupid language' includes halting, circular, or disjointed speech. Also, an insensibility and dullness of linguistic feeling—turning language into rote phrases devoid of nuance or empathy. Another example is pointlessness and utterances that vex or exasperate because they add no value, insight, or relevance to the conversation. Stupidity in language can be mere ignorance but can be deliberate strategy, ritual, or habit. In speech, a stupid remark is not simply uninformed; it is a deliberate, maladaptive choice to ignore available information or logic. The speaker knows—consciously or not—that their words undermine understanding, yet persists, blocking any chance for adaptation or mutual comprehension. Thus, speech-based stupidity is not just the absence of knowledge but the active, self-defeating misuse of language itself. When language swells beyond everyday speech into specialised codes—task forces, overarching principles, strategic initiatives—it ceases to inform and instead becomes a shield for confusion. Words lose their referential power, and facts that contradict personal prejudices can simply be disbelieved. In political and commercial discourse, bland euphemisms, and catchy slogans masquerade as substance. A beauty ad declares a 'delicate-as-air spray' that 'shimmers youth', yet says nothing. Such manufactured gibberish only tricks the mind into passivity. Words like 'synergy', 'empowerment', 'next generation' and 'sustainability' are repeated until they become empty labels. Their proliferation mirrors a 'game of stupid', wherein lowering expectations allows one to shirk responsibility under the guise of harmless incompetence. In an intellectual wordplay the 'clever stupidity' of abstract logic is untethered from experience. Learnt phrases and ornamental metaphors may dazzle, but they often erect barriers to real understanding when affective resistance turns thought into 'pseudo-stupidity'.

As William Blake famously wrote, 'If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise', and Jung affirmed that 'stupidity is the mother of the wise'. Yet these insights praise the unexpected clarity born of simplicity, not the endless churn of meaningless verbiage. Walter B. Pitkin called stupidity 'the supreme social evil', warning that when the powerful speak in vacuous clichés, collective action is paralysed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned that stupidity is 'a more dangerous enemy of the good than evil' because it cannot be reasoned with or restrained: people simply dismiss facts that clash with their prejudices. Its real threat appears in groups, where a stupid individual can commit great wrongs yet remain blind to their own wrongdoing. Carlo Cipolla argued that the truly dangerous stupidity lies not in malice but in minds that cannot grasp their own folly, spreading harm by accident rather than design. Linguistic stupidity emerges when words are divorced from shared meaning—through jargon, euphemism, buzzwords, and cynical doubletalk. Recognising this abuse, people must champion simple, honest speech that invites understanding rather than obscures it, lest we remain dazzled by empty sound and deaf to genuine insight.

In 'Language and Stupidity'[84] James F. Welles warned that language evolved to share information and bind groups, but by carving our world into arbitrary, culture-bound categories it also narrows our experience—and, overall, breeds a collective stupidity. Words are audible symbols that impose fixed labels on the fluid continua of colour, motion, sound, and feeling, creating mental 'schemas' through which we filter reality. This categorisation speeds cognition but invites two fatal errors. First, stereotyping: we overgeneralise, treating all members of a labeled group as identical and discarding the richness of individual variation. Second, linguistic fragmentation: different tongues slice the same world into incompatible conceptual maps, fuelling misunderstanding and conflict rather than mutual enrichment. When fresh evidence clashes with our verbal schema, we instinctively defend our language-shaped beliefs—repressing or rationalising inconvenient facts—rather than update our understanding. Over time, speech proliferates in clichés and dogmas that no longer connect with reality, and 'meaning' frays into empty noise. The endless chatter of words, divorced from direct experience, becomes the very stuff of stupidity: entrenched ignorance that resists correction because it is woven into the grammar of our lives. In sum, the wealth of language carries a hidden tax: the more we talk in preset categories, the more we harden our minds against nuance and truth, marching ever closer to the 'end of meaning' and the reign of collective folly. Every human language carves up the continuous flow of experience—motion, colour, sound—into fixed categories, and these verbal divisions shape how we think, feel, and judge the world. While categorisation can streamline perception, it also breeds stereotyping, the overgeneralising impulse that treats distinct individuals or events as identical. Once we label people by skin colour, religion, or language, we too easily ignore their unique traits and lump everyone under the same mental heading. Using euphemism leads to dehumanisation of speech. Words can be weapons. Euphemisms sanitise violence and obscure meaning so thoroughly that atrocities slip by unnoticed. Language thus framed dehumanising strategies as medical procedures, making it nearly impossible to argue against a policy dressed in innocuous terms.

The use of jargon can bring ideological blindness. Technical or political jargon erects further barriers to clear thought. Whether it is 'executive privilege' and 'national security', or

[84] James, F. and Welles (2021). Language and Stupidity. OA J Behavioural Sci Psych, [online] 2021(1), p.180053. Available at: https://academicstrive.com/OAJBSP/OAJBSP180053.pdf [Accessed 19 May 2025].

partisan epithets for rivals, specialised vocabulary isolates insiders and alienates dissenters. Such language directs attention only to what the ruling group deems important, while trivialising or erasing competing perspectives. Memory can act as a delusion, and language as a filter. Language also encodes our memories, but memory is fallible. We forget inconvenient facts and embellish or invent others, reinforcing our preexisting schemas. In this way, language keeps us in comfortable but misleading narratives, letting us cling to delusions rather than confront reality. Language thus not only shapes perception but also fortifies it against change, trapping us in self-deceptive routines of thought and behaviour. At its most fanciful, language spins tales of afterlives and unseen powers that no empirical test can confirm. While such myths may confer group cohesion or individual comfort, they also illustrate the arbitrary power of words to persuade us of realities that lie entirely outside sensory experience. Not only the linguistic roots of foolishness are revealed but also the foolish roots of language. From the categories we impose on nature to the euphemisms that mask brutality, language carries within it the seeds of our own stupidity. The evolutionary biologist David Krakauer[85] claims that stupidity is not simply the opposite of intelligence. 'Stupidity is using a rule where adding more data doesn't improve your chances of getting a problem right, in fact, it makes it more likely you'll get it wrong'. Intelligence, on the other hand, is using a rule that allows you to solve complex problems with simple, elegant solutions. 'Stupidity is a very interesting class of phenomena in human history, and it has to do with rule systems that have made it harder for us to arrive at the truth', said Krakauer. 'It's an interesting fact that, whilst there are numerous individuals who study intelligence—there are whole departments that are interested in it—if you were to ask yourself what's the greatest problem facing the world today, I would say it would be stupidity. So, we should have professors of stupidity—it would just be embarrassing to be called the stupid professor'.

After digimodernism

Today artificial intelligence is the biggest topic for research, but collective stupidity also waits to be researched. The digital technologies and large language models (LLM) can be used to track and expose linguistic stupidity. In 'Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture' (2009) Alan Kirby discusses the clash between technologies of reason and our mostly irrational culture. Kirby, in his widely read essay 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond' [86] (2006), argues that we have moved into what he calls 'pseudo-modernism'—a cultural logic defined not by grand theories but by individual intervention (especially via the Internet). In 1999, The Stuckist movement and its 'Remodernism' manifesto positioned themselves as 'anti-anti-art', championing figurative painting, beauty, and authenticity against what they saw as postmodernism's vacuous self-involvement. Declaring postmodernism 'lost in the cul-de-sac of idiocy[87]', they charged that its only real innovation lay in marketing hype and predicted it would end up 'in the dustbin of history'. The linguistic stupidity of postmodernism is in its claim to be the apex of history – whilst simultaneously denying the values that make the same history worth having in the first place. It claims to address significant issues but only conducts a convoluted dialogue with itself. Both modernism and postmodernism have fetishised the author—yet in today's culture we have

[85] Pomeroy, R. (2023). What Is Stupidity? [online] RealClearScience. Available at: https://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2019/03/02/what_is_stupidity.html [Accessed 20 May 2025].
[86] Kirby, A. (2006). The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond. Philosophy Now, [online] 58, pp.34–37. Available at: https://philpapers.org/rec/KIRTDO-2.
[87] Philosophynow.org. (2015). Philosophy Now. [online] Available at: https://philosophynow.org/issues/108/The_Afterlives_of_Modernism.

turned that fixation onto the reader until reader and author collapse into one another in social media. Postmodernism once offered a new paradigm of authority and knowledge shaped by emerging technologies and social forces, inviting us to see ourselves as co-authors. Now we have passed beyond what Kirby calls 'pseudo-modernism', where cultural works exist only through our physical intervention: reality TV depends on our votes and clicks, online platforms live off our likes, and every viewer becomes a 'participating viewer' whose mechanical tapping creates the content itself. This pseudo-modernism is amnesiac and shallow. Texts vanish in an instant, leaving no sense of history or future, no enduring cultural value. We remix endlessly. We surf, click and blink through a desert of signs, mistaking habit for control and remote-control for genuine participation. There are no readers now, only viewers, no authors, only avatars in a digital game. Identity shrinks to the insignia of power—your car, your status symbol—while intellectual criticism is co-opted or silenced by consumer fanaticism. In this landscape of technological feudalism, we watch beheadings on our smartphones, trapped in an anxious trance where action equals existence. We have slain the thinking individual, leaving behind only the act of clicking. The death of postmodernism gives way to a hollow digimodernism.

In 'Digimodernism[88]' (2009) Alan Kirby coined this disconcerting new -ism to point more to a world in which innovative words are invented instead of any effort to change things. It is just a linguistic imitation of adaptation to preserve the status quo. The main question is: 'Is it time for a new –ism?' Kirby proposed that postmodernism has brought us to the end of logic and to the collapse of language as a coherent system of order. Its sceptical readings of culture expose life's absurdities and deny any belief in absolute truth or objective reality. In the postmodern era, no single meaning holds sway, every term fractures into contradictory senses. This anti-essentialist, anti-foundational stance declares, 'I don't care—whatever works', privileging pragmatic play over any firm ground. Kirby suggests that what follows is not another rigid theory but escapism: a surrender to complete freedom of thought, a form of philosophical liberalism that abandons the notion of a linear 'logical history' altogether. In this new climate, we drift beyond postmodern scepticism into an ethos that prizes individual imagination over communal consensus, forsaking foundational narratives for the liberty to invent our own. If postmodernism has dissolved our certainties, then perhaps it is indeed time for an 'escapeism'—a new –ism that liberates us from the ruins of logic and invites us to create our own ever-shifting worlds.

Postmodernism's era has arguably ended not with a single inexorable blow but through a thousand small betrayals: its aesthetic tropes, once fresh and subversive, became mass-marketed formulas for children's entertainment; digital pioneers outflanked its experimental provocations; its manifestos were outmoded by digital reality. Whether in computer-animation breakthroughs, AI-written news, deep fake images, and videos, we see postmodernism transformed from an ongoing project into an historical artefact. Although its playful allusions and ironic detachment still colour our culture, they now serve as background noise to new, digitally driven forms of expression. The day will come when postmodernism is remembered rather than lived—and perhaps that day is already upon us. But what -ism comes after so called digimodernism? Maybe it is not a modern one, but traditional? Modernism refers to a broad movement characterised by a conscious rejection of traditional forms and a focus on experimentation and innovation. Traditionalism is the opposite of any intellectual movement emphasising modernising ideas, originality, and novelty. If postmodernism is associated with

[88] Kirby, A. (2009). Digimodernism. A&C Black.

imitation, mimicry, remix, plagiarism, emulation, reproduction, and simulation this is something opposite to modernism or a 'pseudo-modernism'. So digimodernism can be just a camouflage for neo-traditionalism that brings an end to a cultural cycle. Traditionalism is associated with orthodoxy, preservation, conservativeness and unprogressiveness. Today we speak more about 'digital feudalism' instead of 'digimodernism', and yet new -isms are invented.

The term 'techno-feudalism[89]', popularised by Yanis Varoufakis, describes a new phase of economic organisation where massive tech corporations dominate digital life in ways that echo feudal structures. These companies control key digital infrastructures, extract value from user data and attention, and enforce platform-dependent interactions through opaque algorithms. In this system, wealth is not generated primarily through labour but through rent extraction, turning users into dependent tenants rather than autonomous agents. In this new order, giant tech corporations no longer compete through the production of goods or the employment of labour but instead command the digital realm through linguistic domination. They control reality through the codes, interfaces, and algorithmic grammars that mediate nearly all communication and social exchange. A controlled semantic space is constructed in which meaning is distributed, filtered, and often predetermined. This shift resembles feudal power not only in structure but in symbolic function: language, once decentralised and open to public negotiation, is increasingly owned and administered by a new digital aristocracy. These 'cloudalists' no longer profit from what people produce but from what they say, search, and share—extracting value from words, gestures, images, and signals that pass through their systems. The digital user is no longer a speaking subject but a data-producing tenant, living on the linguistic land of a platform. Culturally, this signals the end of liberal humanist ideals of agency and expression. In place of the modern subject who speaks and acts freely, techno-feudalism installs a managed identity—calculated, ranked, and policed by hidden protocols. The language of communication becomes a medium of surveillance; the tools of expression are designed to extract behaviour. Cultural production itself—memes, posts, messages—is guided by algorithmic incentives that reward repetition, outrage, or performative novelty. Speech is no longer expressive but functional, no longer dialogic but strategic.

Power, under techno-feudalism, does not declare itself through force but speaks through code. It enacts itself in the micro-decisions of interfaces and the architecture of visibility. As such, culture is no longer made by communities negotiating meaning but by algorithms that distribute what is speakable, clickable, and shareable. In this system, meaning itself becomes a form of currency—managed, monetised, and subject to the terms of service. Language is rented in a techno-feudal economy. Techno-feudalism transforms culture into code and language into laborless rent. Meaning is no longer created freely in dialogue but leased from platforms that own the channels of expression. Postmodernism's critique of authenticity, authority, and coherence finds material realisation in this system, where culture is fragmented, voices are modulated by algorithms, and language becomes both the means and the object of control. What emerges is a techno-feudal economy of speech, where the very act of saying becomes submission to a linguistic order not of one is making but of one’s habitation.

Consolatio Philosophiae

In 'Consolatio Philosophiae' Boetius asks why we crave fame when fame itself is nothing, but the stories and memories others attach to your name? Fame is just words. For a time, you

[89]Yanis Varoufakis (2023). Techno-Feudalism. Random House.

may become the hero of myths, yet to yourself, that renown holds no substance. Some people chase global renown, hoping its echo will last. But as decades pass, even the greatest legends shrink to mere names and images, two sides of a coin with no weight or meaning behind them. When honours fall upon the undeserving, they betray rather than ennoble, for false titles are exposed by the mismatch between name and quality. Riches, power, and prestigious awards cannot claim true worth when Fortune bestows them without regard for virtue. In the end, nothing in Fortune is to be sought, for she possesses no inherent good: she does not choose the worthy, nor does her favour transform the unworthy into something better. In the face of Fortune's empty promises, true consolation lies in making peace with the inner self rather than seeking the hollow rewards of fame. In Prose VII Boetius tells the story of a certain man once launched a harsh attack on another who had assumed the title of philosopher—not in pursuit of genuine virtue, but out of vanity and a hunger for recognition. He added, with cutting irony, that the truth of his philosophy would soon be tested by how patiently he endured the abuse now directed at him. The accused man bore the insults for a time, pretending indifference, and then asked, 'Do you now see that I am a philosopher?' The reply came sharp and swift: 'I would have—had you remained silent'. But here we are speaking of great men. And one must ask: what do they truly gain from fame, even if they seek it through virtue? What remains for them once the body dissolves in death? If death ends all, as reason strongly denies, then no glory can follow, for there would be no one left to possess it. But if the mind lives on, conscious and active beyond its mortal confines, then it must turn its gaze toward the heavens. Freed from the weight of the flesh, it will surely reject all worldly affairs, delighting instead in its release and exalting in the realm beyond, untouched by the transience of earthly praise. What lies in the silence beyond glory? True greatness does not dwell in the noise of recognition but in the stillness of integrity. Whether the soul persists or perishes, the pursuit of virtue must stand independent of fame. For if the mind endures, it seeks a higher realm; and if not, no praise can reach the silence that follows.

The paradox of knowledge—captured in the phrase 'the more you learn, the more you realise you don't know'—reveals both the boundless scope of knowledge and the inherent limits of human understanding. In the context of human limitation, linguistic obsolescence, and the epistemology of stupidity, the notion of 'unknow' becomes a central topic. At first glance, knowledge appears as a path toward clarity—a gradual mastery of a subject. Yet as one advances, the contours of that knowledge expand, not into certainty but into uncertainty. Every insight uncovers deeper layers of complexity, hidden assumptions, interconnections, and exceptions that erode the illusion of total understanding. This deepening of awareness parallels the Dunning-Kruger effect: the paradox wherein the least informed are often the most confident, while those with genuine expertise grow hesitant—not from weakness, but from the recognition that their knowledge brushes against an ocean of the unknown. In this way, intelligence becomes not an accumulation of facts but an ongoing confrontation with ambiguity. It is not what one knows, but how one endures the limits of knowing that marks true understanding. Sometimes the mask of stupidity can be a rational choice and an intelligent decision. Initial learning feels empowering precisely because it simplifies. It frames reality into manageable models, offering a false sense of mastery. But as one continues, each framework reveals its blind spots, its historical contingency, its metaphoric character. True awareness does not clarify the world—it dissolves the illusion that it can be clarified. In the digital era—saturated with information, endlessly connected yet increasingly incoherent—this paradox takes on new urgency. Algorithms promise precision yet amplify confusion. Data floods every discourse but meaning remains elusive. The more we see, the less we understand. The more we speak, the

less language holds. Thus, in a world where complexity grows faster than comprehension, the first task of any future paradigm is to institutionalise epistemic humility. The 'study of stupidity' is not an insult but an admission: that our tools—language, logic, models—are always provisional, always inadequate. Intelligence begins where arrogance ends, and knowledge deepens when it acknowledges its own fragility. The paradigm of linguistic knowledge must move from clarity to humility and towards the 'ethics of unknowing'. To think deeply today is to dwell not in certainty but in complexity. The paradox of knowledge—where more learning reveals more unknowing—demands a shift from confident systems toward open-ended inquiry. The only responsible thought is one that begins with its own limits. The only sustainable intelligence is one that embraces stupidity not as error, but as the ground condition of understanding. In an age of information without wisdom, we must craft new languages that admit their own obsolescence, and new theories that begin in silence, not speech.

The first principle of new thought must be acknowledging human stupidity in the age of digital complexity. No human mind can make rational decisions based on complex digital data. We must acknowledge that stupidity is a highly likely outcome of language. If Boethius warned us from within his cell that all fame, glory, and intellectual pride dissolve with the body then today's complexity reasserts that warning through far subtler traps. As humans, we continue to reason and to speak, though both reason and language are tools inherently unfit for the reality they aim to grasp. Our minds, wired for survival rather than truth, cling to structures—models, ideologies, and systems of meaning—that cannot account for the sheer irreducibility of the world. In this light, 'intelligence' may be defined as the ability to navigate complexity efficiently. But 'stupidity', far more common and less examined, emerges when our cognitive or cultural tools—rules, traditions, ideologies—are applied blindly, persistently, even heroically, despite their obvious mismatch with the problems at hand. The more complex our systems become—neural, ecological, technological—the more pressing this mismatch becomes. And the more information we generate, the greater our risk of mistaking noise for knowledge, data for wisdom, and linguistic maps for the terrain of reality. Language, by its very nature, compresses and distorts. It names what cannot be wholly grasped. It categorises what overflows categories. The philosopher who breaks silence to declare his virtue already undermines it—just as every -ism, every theory, every proclamation of clarity, already signals its obsolescence. All systems of meaning are planned for extinction the moment they are uttered. The true beginning of any new paradigm, then, must not be a declaration of insight, but an acknowledgment of our deep structural stupidity. The more intricate a system is—like a brain, a city, or a culture—the harder it is to describe, let alone control. This is not a metaphor. It is a law of information. And yet we continue to build ideologies, technologies, and social structures atop conceptual ruins, mistaking the simulation for substance, the interface for interaction, the algorithm for agency. Thus, we return to Boethius—not to repeat his theology, but to recover his humility. What survives the wreck of language is not certainty, but the need to confront our own incapacity. In an era of exponentially growing information, shifting identities, and recursive simulations, intelligence alone is futile. We must develop a new epistemic 'ethics of unknowing': one that begins with the confession of error, the fragility of meaning, and the inevitable obsolescence of every linguistic form. The most honest philosophy today is the one that accepts that explanation itself is a form of failure. In this failure, in this planned breakdown of meaning, lies the only path toward a deeper, more durable form of understanding.

Nobody is a prophet in his own village

There is a reason no one listens to the prophet at home. In the streets where he once played, among the people who remember his first stumbles with speech, no eloquence will make them believe he now speaks truth. The proverb 'Nobody is a prophet in his own village' captures more than local scepticism—it reveals something deeper and more disturbing: that language, no matter how refined, is always haunted by its origins in noise, babble, and play. Those who remember you before you could speak will never believe your words are divine. This is not simply a social irony—it is a structural condition of language itself. Every word is compromised by its history. Every system of meaning carries the memory of its failure. As Boethius knew, speech cannot save us; it dies with the body or is ignored by those who watched us learn to speak. And yet, we keep speaking. We build philosophies out of phonemes, nations out of narratives, religions from recitations. We try to solve with language the very problems language has created. Why do we persist in this ritual of absurd repetition—formulating new ideologies, new -isms, new forms of collective wisdom? Perhaps because stupidity is not an error in the system, but the system itself. It is the default mode of language: the endless production of abstractions that detach us from life. We think we are getting smarter, but our sophistication is only verbal. Philosophy becomes philology; wisdom becomes rhetoric; community dissolves into communicative performance. We replace lived belonging with linguistic coherence, shared meaning with grammatically correct solitude. The more we know, the less we understand. Complexity grows faster than comprehension. Every increase in information expands the unknown. Intelligence ties to solve complexity, but stupidity clings to rules that obscure or block understanding. And yet it is those rules—social, linguistic, institutional—that govern civilisation. We are ruled not by wisdom but by collective stupidity so systematised we no longer recognise it as such.

In this sense, the death of competence is not a cultural accident—it is the logical consequence of a society that has elevated expression above substance. Expertise has been dethroned, not by ignorance, but by the democratisation of linguistic self-expression. Everyone is a speaker; no one is a listener. The educated elite overproduces language but underproduces meaning. The prophet is drowned in noise because everyone now plays prophet, but no one plays disciple. We do not form communities anymore—only teams, brands, networks. We no longer speak to each other in trust, but in tactics. Fame and monetisation replace inner calling. Language becomes not shared belief but personal marketing and there is no inner necessity to share. The most profound understanding does not need to be spoken, explained, or even thought. It only needs to be enacted. The society that cannot suspend disbelief in its own myths begins to disintegrate. Everyone starts playing their own game. The collective collapses into fragments. What follows is not barbarism but bureaucracy—the world of competence replaced by credentials, tradition replaced by technique, community replaced by calculation. So, silence is our last competence. The prophet’s failure is not his message—it is the medium. His words are disbelieved because language itself is no longer trusted, because it has become too familiar, too compromised, too strategic. In a society where all speech is performance, only silence remains prophetic. Real competence, today, may lie not in knowing more or speaking better, but in recognising the limits of both. It is not through education, information, or debate that wisdom returns—but through the refusal to mistake eloquence for truth. In an age of digimodernist complexity, the greatest act of intelligence may be to speak nothing, do simply, and live outside the village where language has lost its power.

Language death is often defined narrowly: it occurs when a community no longer claims a tongue as native, and its final speaker falls silent. Yet language can begin to die long before that final breath. It dies not only when no one speaks it—but when it no longer binds people together. Language, in its essence, is not merely a tool for exchanging information. It is the architecture of community, the medium through which persons encounter one another as ends, not as means. But when language becomes instrumentalised—used primarily for control, administration, marketing, propaganda—it ceases to relate. It commands. It manipulates. It objectifies. The tongue no longer speaks; it calculates. It becomes a badge of access, a signal of status, a filter of inclusion and exclusion. Those who do not master its codes are shamed, silenced, or assimilated. This is not merely a matter of linguistic loss, but of ethical rupture. In the collapse of small tongues, dialects, or intimate speech registers, we lose more than words—we lose ways of being-with-others. Each language holds a unique grammar of relation, a singular rhythm of empathy, irony, love, and resistance. When speech becomes standard, globalised, and performative, what dies is not just vocabulary, but the trust that words are meant to hold. Even within a shared tongue, death begins when two people speak and no longer hear each other. When communication becomes one-directional—when it is used to instruct, advertise, manage, or extract—the person across from us is no longer a subject in dialogue, but a target, a market, a function. This is language's transformation from communion to control. It is the speech of systems, not of souls. We must then recognise that language death is not only about extinction, but about inversion. It occurs when speech no longer draws us into community but separates us into silos of power, consumption, or abstraction. It is when the public tongue expands, but the private word—the whisper, the joke, the prayer, the secret—vanishes. When language ceases to be a bridge and becomes a tool, a screen, a mechanism, it begins to die—no matter how loudly or widely it is spoken. The death of language is the death of relation. To resist this, we must recover speech not as performance or transaction, but as presence—a fragile, mutual act of becoming together in meaning.

In 'The Revolution of Hope[90]', Erich Fromm envisions a new human archetype: homo esperans, the hopeful man—not the toolmaker (homo faber), the rational planner (homo sapiens), the aimless player (homo ludens), nor the defiant rebel (homo negans)—but the one who chooses to believe in our capacity for shared meaning, tenderness, and transformation. Language, in this vision, is not an instrument of persuasion or efficiency—it is the fragile, flickering bridge between souls. It is not a system, not a code, not a tool to manage others. It is a 'happening'—a momentary spark of togetherness, a shared rhythm of breath and understanding, fleeting but real. The only meaning language deeply holds is in this transient union. For Homo Esperans language is a fragile bridge towards a moments of togetherness. Carl Jung once said the opposite of love is not hate, but power. Whenever language becomes a means to manipulate, control, or impress, we lose what it was meant to hold: a mutual presence. Intelligence used to dominate is not wisdom—it is loss. A voice that seeks to conquer forfeits the chance to connect. In the name of efficiency and clarity, we filter, censor, simplify—but in doing so, we erase the trembling complexity of shared human experience. True speech is not repeatable. It lives in a moment—between two people, in a room, on a quiet evening, where something passes from one heart to another, unrecorded. Anything valuable in language must be received as if it were meant only for you. Meaning is not preserved in books, systems, or ideologies—it is preserved in you, in the trembling of your body when you were seen, heard, and held through words. The future of language does not lie in mastery, optimisation, or global

[90] Fromm, E. (2023). The Revolution of Hope. Open Road Media.

control, but in intimacy. In every moment when one person speaks not to use another, but to be with them, language fulfils its only true function: communion. Homo esperans does not speaks fluently but dares to say something real to someone he loves. In that trembling instant, language lives. Language is not the house of being. It is the opposite.

3. Language and evil

'The First Man Was an Artist'

In 'The First Man Was an Artist' (1947) Barnett Newman, stated that undoubtedly the very first human was an artist. From the start, our ancestors expressed themselves not to ask for sustenance but to give voice to wonder and despair. A homo esperans was born, the hoping man. A man that created speech to express his hopes and dreams. The hoping men created language as a binding tool for collective imagination. In the beginning their inaugural utterance resembled song more than speech, a poetic shout born of self-awareness and helplessness before the unknown. Modern linguists recognise that if language is simply an animal ability to exchange signs, the true humanity of speech lies in literature, not in literal communication. The initial cry between primal companions was one of power and solemn weakness, an address to mystery rather than a request for water. Archaeology shows stone idols and axe-heads in the same layers, evidence that the impulse to sculpt preceded—even suggested—the functional work of toolmaking. The image of deity was humanity's earliest sculptural act, not pottery, which only arrived with settled civilisation. Millennials later language and art became entangled in questions of beauty itself, unable to offer a transcendent message. Liberated from traditional cultural weight, some deny that language's task is to resolve the problem of communion. In an age without sublime legend or myth, refusing both pure abstraction and historical nostalgia, we seek to create revelation in its most concrete form. Our words stand on their own, accessible to anyone but without the augmented lens of the past. The speaker's true origin lies in communion impulse, preceding tool, and info. When language loses its connection to a living myth, it flounders in debates over meanings. To renew the sublime today we must produce words that reveal themselves by history's reverie.

What ancient cave paintings has to do with the emergence of language[91]? Early modern humans possessed cognitive abilities far beyond those of other primates, as evidenced by their rapid advances in toolmaking, the appearance of complex speech, and the creation of sophisticated art. One puzzling phenomenon is prehistoric cave art—pictographs and petroglyphs often located deep within chambers that are otherwise difficult to reach. Remarkably, over ninety percent of these images are hoofed animals, clustered on walls that turn out to be acoustic 'hot spots'. Recent work in archeoacoustics shows that these sites were chosen for their echoing qualities: sounds produced there reverberate in ways that resemble the percussive beat of animal hooves. We propose that such cave paintings represent a form of cross-modality information transfer, where early humans mapped acoustic impressions into

[91]Miyagawa, S., Lesure, C. and Nóbrega, V.A. (2018). Cross-Modality Information Transfer: A Hypothesis about the Relationship among Prehistoric Cave Paintings, Symbolic Thinking, and the Emergence of Language. Frontiers in Psychology, [online] 9. doi:https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00115.

visual symbols. By detecting how sound behaved in each chamber—its echoes, resonances, and patterns of reverberation—they externalised those auditory experiences as painted images. In quieter recesses of the same caves, one instead finds depictions of felines or simple dots and handprints, suggesting that artists deliberately matched subject matter to the sonic character of each space. This practice illustrates the gradual emergence of symbolic thinking that would eventually underlie full language. Such rock art may thus serve as one of the first fossilised proxies for linguistic behaviour. In this light, cave paintings are concrete evidence of the mind's transition from internal reflection to shared, symbolic expression. By painting on acoustic hot spots, our distant ancestors revealed a cross-modal leap—translating echoes into enduring symbols. These images anticipate the rise of language itself, offering a tangible record of humanity's first steps toward externalised, symbolic thought.

Cave and rock art share remarkable parallels not only with human language but early moral codes. Like speech, these ancient images serve communicative purposes, depicting actions, objects and qualities in ways that externalise inner thoughts. Rather than marginal curiosity, cave, and rock art stand as tangible records of the symbolic mind's rise—evidence that art and language co-evolved to give modern humans a decisive evolutionary edge of sociability. Cave and rock art mirror language in origin, distribution, function, and even genetic underpinnings. By externalising sound into image and thought into symbol, early humans inaugurated the shared cognitive framework that underlies 'hyperprosociality'. If cross-modality transfer helped forge our symbolic intellect, then art and language are central to the very architecture of human morality. Extremely altruistic behaviour toward unrelated individuals is a hallmark of Homo sapiens, enabling the formation of vast groups that work, fight, and live together under shared rules. The term altruism, from Latin 'alteri' (other people), reflects an evolutionary impulse seen in many social animals but taken to its highest expression in humans. In moral philosophy, actions gain value solely by their beneficial impact on others—men must serve humanity. Positivism sought genuine knowledge through reasoned, empirical observation and dismissed intuition or faith; yet altruism itself often rests on non-rational convictions or mysticism. Even so, those who give selflessly often reap personal rewards: prestige, recognition, a sense of purpose. Conspicuous altruism—the ritual display of generosity before an audience—turns self-sacrifice into social capital. States may enforce moral ideals through propaganda, laws, and the language of duty, implanting self-denial as a collective norm. Intrinsic rewards, from seeing one's name engraved in stone to receiving an honorific title, testify that no act of giving is wholly disinterested. Moreover, gift cultures and systems of debt forgiveness—non-market exchanges based on reciprocity—have been vital in shaping human societies. 'Hyperprosociality' is the uniquely human drive toward widespread altruism has underpinned our ability to build complex civilisations. Yet it is a double-edged phenomenon: a source of profound solidarity and a tool for social control.

The rituals of giving among ancient societies—such as the Kula ring of the Trobriand Islanders, the potlatch of the First Nations, or the koha of the Māori—might seem economically irrational. Men risked hardship and danger to exchange seemingly 'worthless' items. Yet these exchanges were not about utility or dominance, but about connection, obligation, and shared meaning. As Marcel Mauss showed in his seminal essay 'The Gift' (1925), such acts were not economic in a market sense but moral and social. Gifts carried symbolic value, fostering trust, alliance, and cohesion in communities where no state or market governed behaviour. Mauss

revealed that these seemingly generous acts were undergirded by complex networks of reciprocity, mutual respect, and shared norms—tools not of control, but of integration. Even when rivalry was present, it was ritualised and transformed into mutual recognition. This moral economy of giving, he argued, survives today in institutions like welfare, where care for strangers is formalised and depersonalised, yet still rooted in an ethic of mutual support. Anthropological findings support this. Paleoanthropologist Curtis Marean has shown that 'hyperprosociality'—cooperation among unrelated individuals—was essential for Homo sapiens to flourish. Around 70,000 years ago, early humans began cooperating on an unprecedented scale, driven not by power, but by the symbolic communication of language and art. These tools allowed humans to build trust, share knowledge, and recognise one another as part of larger, meaningful collectives. Paradoxically, the same traits that allowed humans to cooperate—symbolic language, group identity, and altruism—also made it possible to exclude, compete, and wage war.

Yet culture offered a powerful redirection: instead of fighting, humans developed rituals of giving. In these symbolic exchanges, aggression was transformed into status-sharing and obligation, into lasting social bonds rather than destructive force. From the ancient Kula expeditions across the Pacific to lunar-timed shellfish gathering on African shores, it was the generosity between strangers—not exploitation—that built the foundations of complex civilisation. These gift economies were not primitive markets, but the scaffolding of social trust and moral identity. Language, when used to share love, care, and mutual recognition, reveals its highest purpose. But when language is turned toward manipulation, control, or domination, its gift is lost—and with it, the heart of human sociability. Is love the true language of civilisations? May be civilisations were not built on dominance, but on the fragile courage to give without immediate return, to speak not for command but for communion? The gift—whether a trinket or a word—bound our ancestors into networks of trust that enabled cooperation on a massive scale. May be altruism, not power, lies at the root of human success?

From blood rites to word rites

The transition from sacrifice to symbol, from kinship to law gave birth to a new specie, the speaking man. In 'In Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War'(2011), Barbara Ehrenreich radically reframes the origins of human civilisation, showing that early societies were not formed around conquest, control, or dominion, but around sacrifice and survival. Her central claim is that humans were not born predators but prey—vulnerable, hunted, and bonded by fear. This foundational vulnerability laid the groundwork for a deeply rooted culture of sacrifice, which preceded and shaped all later forms of collective organisation. For millions of years, our ancestors lived in a world where death came suddenly and violently—from sabertooths, hyenas, and other large carnivores. The skeletons of early hominins are covered with claw and tooth marks, their tools rudimentary and their bodies defenceless. It was not until about 50,000 years ago that the development of more sophisticated hunting techniques began to reverse this relationship. Even then, survival remained a communal effort. The pattern of one member being killed while others escaped became etched into the human psyche, forming the first template of the sacrificial victim—a logic where one dies so others may live. This sacrificial logic, Ehrenreich argues, became mythologised across cultures: the bull or lamb offered to the gods, the shaman who crossed between worlds, the warrior who dies for the tribe. These early religious rites, saturated with blood and reverence, served to stabilise fragile social

bonds. Ritual sacrifice was not only an offering to higher powers but a shared moment of symbolic violence that unified the community in awe and fear. The predator became a god, the victim, a sacred conduit. Such rituals were essential, creating meaning in death and encoding social rules through symbolic acts.

The earliest spiritual figure, the shaman, played a vital role in this transition. By embodying both predator and prey—often through trance states or hallucinogenic plants—the shaman internalised the risks of survival and translated them into communal knowledge. This capacity to imagine another's perspective, to simulate outcomes in the mind, marks a turning point in human cognition. It required symbolic language and an early form of narrative imagination. Sacrifice became not just an act, but a story—a ritualised communication of danger, hope, and redemption. The breakthrough of human symbolic capacity, occurring around 50,000 years ago, remains one of the great mysteries of prehistory. Whether triggered by neurological change, linguistic evolution, or psychoactive ritual, this cognitive revolution allowed humans to create and transmit myth, law, and moral codes. Language made it possible not only to coordinate and survive but to remember, to moralise, and to construct complex societies no longer dependent on kinship alone. This transformation is echoed in the evolution from blood rites to word rites—from sacrificial rituals rooted in familial and tribal bonds to institutions governed by laws, contracts, and shared symbols. Where once kinship and blood determined belonging, now abstract principles like justice, duty, and honour bound individuals into communities. Sacred violence gradually gave way to sacred speech. The spoken curse replaced the thrown spear; the oath replaced the wound.

Ehrenreich also shows that the ecstasy and unity once felt during sacrificial rituals did not disappear. Instead, it re-emerged in the mass experiences of war. In the modern era, states substituted ritual bloodletting with national sacrifice. Soldiers offered their lives as the 'supreme sacrifice', and the battlefield became a secular altar. Even Clausewitz's vision of war as political calculation could not erase its religious and ecstatic dimensions. From ancient chants to national anthems, from tribal war paint to military uniforms, the transformation of men into warriors still follows a ritual logic rooted in the symbolic substitution of the self for a greater cause. Rites of passage—once marked by blood, now marked by speech, contract, or formal ceremony—continue to shape human experience. Whether in legal trials, religious conversions, or national memorials, we enact transitions through symbolic acts that mirror the old sacrificial economy. Even contemporary bureaucracy reflects this structure: highly ritualised, governed by language, abstract, yet binding. The communal ecstasy of war, too, is no longer reducible to base instinct. Ehrenreich and others reject the theory of an innate 'killer instinct', noting instead that war requires transformation through language and symbol. Soldiers do not kill as civilians; they must be re-socialised, re-scripted through rituals, drills, and collective myth. This is not nature, but culture at its most organised—language turned into a script of obedience and sacrifice. Yet this symbolic system is double-edged. Just as language enabled solidarity, law, and cooperation beyond blood ties, it also enabled the abstraction of violence—making it easier to direct aggression at strangers, to mythologise the enemy, and to glorify death. The very tools that lifted us out of blood relations also risk dehumanising others through names, categories, and legal fictions.

One of the most striking elements Ehrenreich explores is how ancient gods were imagined as carnivorous beings, demanding real food—especially meat and blood. Sacrificial offerings were, at root, acts of survival. By feeding the gods, humans fed themselves. These deities

symbolised not only protection, but the predatory world humans sought to control. The rituals surrounding these offerings—slaughter, butchery, communal feasting—transformed necessity into sacred performance. Even when animal sacrifice faded, its logic remained embedded in religious narratives: from Abraham's near-killing of Isaac to Christ's death as the 'Lamb of God'. Modern religions, especially Christianity, continue to operate under the sacrificial logic of substitution: one dies that others may live. Communion re-enacts this rite in symbolic form. Bread and wine replace flesh and blood, but the structure endures. The word has replaced the wound, but it preserves its memory. René Girard deepens this insight by showing how sacrifice works not only as religious offering but as social mechanism. In his theory of the scapegoat, communal violence is deflected onto a single victim, whose death restores peace. Whether in ancient pharmakos rituals or modern military funerals, the community is bound together through the exclusion—or elimination—of one. War, in this sense, becomes a macro-sacrifice: the offering of the young for the illusion of peace, or for the consolidation of collective identity. Thus, the movement from blood rites to word rites is not a clean break but a complex transformation. The language of law, myth, ritual, and war still carries the trace of sacrifice. The courtroom, the church, the battlefield, and the state ceremony all reproduce in symbolic form what once required real blood. But this shift matters. By replacing the act with the word, humanity opened the path to negotiation, imagination, and forgiveness. Language made possible a form of connection that transcended kinship and immediate reciprocity.

And yet, language too can be misused. When used to dominate, to control, to obscure or deceive, it becomes a perversion of its original purpose. The capacity to bind through words can also be wielded to divide and destroy. The logic of love that underpinned the first acts of sharing and sacrifice is lost when language serves only to manipulate. In this light, civilisation itself becomes a fragile achievement: not the triumph of control but the evolution of mutual recognition through shared symbols. From blood to speech, from scream to song, from slaughter to sentence—we have turned the rituals of survival into languages of justice and solidarity. But only if those words are spoken in truth, and only if they serve love rather than power, can the rites of language fulfill the hope once offered at the altar. We went on the long path from scar to symbol. The history of human civilisation is a passage from bodily sacrifice to symbolic exchange, from kinship enforced by blood to communities founded on shared language. The same instincts that once demanded blood now demand meaning. Rites of war and religion have not disappeared but have taken on verbal and symbolic forms. The sacred persists, not in the knife, but in the word. And with each transition—from death to myth, from scream to sentence—we move closer to a society where love, not fear, binds us. The word is our last rite, and its proper use—toward empathy, justice, and communion—is the truest measure of our humanity.

Defence hypothesis

'To the humble seeker of biological truth there cannot be the slightest doubt that human militant enthusiasm evolved out of a communal defence response of our prehuman ancestors'.
—Konrad Lorenz

The origin of war lies not in hatred or ambition alone, but in fear—specifically, the shared fear of being hunted. Konrad Lorenz's provocative thesis, echoed by Steven M. Stanley and his Predation Hypothesis, contends that the foundations of human aggression and collective violence were not born in conquest, but in defence. Before Homo sapiens became predators, we

were prey. And in that fearful beginning lies the emotional core of what would become ritual, war, and political propaganda. Language was not merely an evolutionary tool for cooperation and culture, but a weapon forged in the crucible of defence—uniting the group, warning of danger, and eventually preparing the many to fight as one. According to Defense Hypothesis as an evolutionary imperative, early hominids were cast out of the trees by climate change and forced onto predator-filled savannahs. Here, the small, slow, and physically vulnerable protohumans survived not through dominance, but through sociality. What made this transformation possible was the rise of defensive cognition: a brain shaped less by hunting tactics and more by the urgent need to avoid being hunted. Fire was first used not to cook meat, but to repel nighttime predators. Stones were first sharpened not to kill, but to shield. And language—crude at first—may have evolved from alarm cries, gradually shaping into a more sophisticated system of signals and commands. This defensive pressure left an indelible mark on human development. Our ancestors' communal life was not merely an adaptation to cooperation for hunting large game, but a necessity born of vulnerability. Social cohesion became paramount because, alone, no individual could survive. The logic of group survival shaped everything: campfire clusters, cooperative child-rearing, and emotional bonds forged by shared peril. Even the high-pitched wails of human infants—outcries disproportionate to momentary discomfort—are rooted in this ancient fear. To be left alone was to die.

Hominid social behaviour, then, was born not out of the thrill of the chase, but the anxiety of the hunted. The defence of offspring, particularly vulnerable due to the prolonged human gestation and development period, added another layer of social complexity. In predator-rich environments, children remained close to camp well into their teens, necessitating prolonged cooperation and extended family structures. Unlike other mammals, humans required not just mothers and fathers, but entire communities to raise and defend the young. This evolutionary defence imperative also shaped the division of labour and sexual dimorphism. Contrary to the image of the solitary male hunter, early human males served as peripheral sentinels, protecting the camp's outer edges. Like baboon males who position themselves as shields, early human males bore the risk first. Over time, this role shaped not only the size and strength of both sexes—since human females are unusually robust compared to other primates—but also the deep emotional bonds and long-term pair bonding necessary for coordinated vigilance and provisioning. Human sexuality, with its extended receptivity and intimacy, served the purpose of cementing group loyalty as much as reproduction. Lorenz's insight into militant enthusiasm reframes warfare not as a perverse exception to our social nature but as its extension under pressure. Once humans became capable of symbolic communication, the defence response became narrative. Danger was no longer only present—it could be imagined, remembered, and anticipated. This capacity to rehearse possible futures through language gave rise to a powerful new behaviour: collective preemption. The community, once unified against the lion or hyena, could now be unified against human threats—real or invented. From here, the leap to organised warfare was tragically short. Language, which had once warned of actual danger, now could be used to create the illusion of danger. Stories of monstrous enemies, of encroaching tribes, of threats to our women and children, became tools to mobilise the group. The same emotions once marshalled against a beast could now be turned against another people. And in this sense, propaganda is not an aberration but the linguistic mutation of an ancient scream. It is the alarm call, multiplied and rationalised, channelled into symbols, banners, chants, and commands.

But war is not simply a product of rhetoric. Its power lies in its ritual and emotional depth. As Ehrenreich and Lorenz both note, the communal ecstasy of violence—the trance of battle, the bond of shared blood—is rooted in prehistoric defence. Early myths, from Perseus to Saint George, narrate a victory not just over danger, but over fear itself. These stories encode the prestige of the defender: the one who saves the many. In every cultural tradition, the hero emerges not as an aggressor, but as a sacrificial figure who confronts danger and transforms it into meaning. This sacrificial logic is central to war's enduring emotional appeal. Early humans, unable to save everyone, likely came to accept—perhaps even ritualise—the death of one for the group. This dynamic survives in religious sacrifice, in war memorials, in the veneration of soldiers as martyrs. Warfare sanctifies death by reframing it as service. As Lorenz observed, the group finds cohesion not only in survival, but in the willingness of its members to die for it. Yet the origins of war in defence do not make it benign. If anything, they reveal its insidious power. The capacity to tell stories that bind large groups of people together—what Benedict Anderson famously called 'imagined communities'—also enables the construction of enemies. Language builds nations, but also names targets. The same words that inspire love and unity—'homeland', 'freedom', 'honour'—can be repurposed to justify violence. In this way, the development of language and large-scale social cohesion inevitably required a new form of social management: mythmaking, ceremonial identity, and if necessary, war.

Once early humans succeeded in uniting hundreds or thousands through language, they faced a new danger: other large groups, similarly organised, similarly armed. Thus, the more successful a society became at symbolic cohesion, the more urgently it had to prepare for symbolic and real conflict. Language, then, is not just a vehicle of cooperation but a tool of mobilisation—shaping not only collective memory but collective fury. The communal defence response, which once drove predators away from the perimeter of the camp, now manifests in national borders, military parades, and preemptive strikes. Rituals—whether masked dances, initiation ceremonies, or state funerals—rehearse the logic of ancient confrontation: us versus them, life versus death, prey versus predator. These rituals build emotional readiness and suppress individual moral hesitations. The soldier is not born; he is made, through a process of linguistic and symbolic transformation. The ancient rebellion against the beast, then, was never only about survival. It was a foundational moment in human identity: the choice to stand, to fight, to speak. Every time we retell the myth of the dragonslayer, of the brave defender, we echo that moment of defiance. And every time a state constructs an 'enemy', calls for 'defence', and rallies its people with slogans and flags, it draws on the same neural and cultural scripts evolved on the savannah. But this capacity is double-edged. If language made war possible, it also made peace possible. The symbolic imagination that envisions enemies can also envision reconciliation. The same narratives that inspire aggression can inspire understanding. The problem is not language itself, but its direction. The defence hypothesis does not condemn humanity to eternal war; it reveals the deep emotional currents that language taps into—and warns us of their power. The defence hypothesis traces the roots of human violence not to aggression but to fear—the ancient fear of being hunted. From that fear emerged the need for sociality, for vigilance, for the cry of alarm. Out of that cry came language. And with language, the power to unify, to remember, to imagine, and to attack. Konrad Lorenz was right: war began as communal defence. But with the rise of language, defence became story, story became myth, and myth became strategy. Today, as in the past, we speak ourselves into war—and sometimes,

if we are wise, we speak ourselves out of it. Language is our most dangerous weapon, both a shield and a sword.

War is a male sport

'A rough male sport', Cormac McCarthy once wrote, 'it makes no difference what men think of war … War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting the ultimate practitioner'. McCarthy's words capture a haunting truth: war is not an accidental or occasional phenomenon in human history but a core element of civilisation itself—ritualised, gendered, sustained by language, and persistent. It is a practice shaped by biology and refined by culture, entangled with the emergence of large social structures, and enacted through the words and symbols that make collective violence possible. Language evokes war and violence as a ritual of masculine power. The first signs of warfare trace back to the Mesolithic, around twelve thousand years ago. From Spanish cave paintings of groups wielding bows in combat to mass graves in Egypt and East Asia bearing spear and arrow wounds, the archaeological record shows that war emerged not with states but with organised human communities. The precise causes—territorial competition, status, sexual access, or the need for sacrificial victims—remain debated. But the pattern is clear: war coalesced alongside social complexity, and its rituals drew from earlier human-animal struggles. Most crucially, it was language that enabled this transformation. Without shared stories, commands, and narratives of loyalty and danger, no large-scale coordination of aggression could have occurred. Before humans turned on one another, they battled the animal world. Spears and arrows were first shaped for hunting. Tactics now associated with war—ambush, encirclement, coordinated assault—originated as survival strategies against large prey. Even in historical eras, the language of hunting persisted. European light infantry was named 'jägers' (hunters), and French skirmishers were called 'chasseurs'. Their military identities echoed the prehistoric pursuit of animal life, a symbolic link to mankind’s earliest expressions of group coordination and aggression. But coordination is impossible without language. It is not the weapon that makes an army, but the command—the shouted warning, the oath of allegiance, the tale of vengeance.

As the Ice Age ended and megafauna disappeared across the globe, men who once hunted mammoths or fended off saber-toothed predators found themselves without a purpose. Human overkill—evidenced by the Clovis people’s spear points found among the remains of thirty-five extinct species in North America—had done more than alter ecosystems. It had left a cultural void. In the absence of large prey, men turned their sharpened tools toward one another. The rituals of the hunt were transposed into raids and battles. The hunter’s courage, cunning, and strength found new expression in human conflict. And it was language—myth, poetry, war cries—that reframed these acts not as murder, but as valour. In this context, war became a masculine performance. The hunter-defender, once essential for group survival, needed to reinvent his social role. Warfare provided this outlet. It was not only a continuation of earlier survival behaviour but an arena in which young men could prove themselves, gain prestige, and earn access to reproductive opportunities. Male identity was tied to risk, endurance, and the capacity for violence. As wild prey vanished, women did not fill the void in martial performance; instead, they were often recast as the very objects of conflict—prizes, captives, or symbols of purity to be protected or avenged. Language helped fix these roles in place. Myths, songs, and heroic epics taught boys what it meant to be men. War stories—real and

imagined—created a warrior ethos and preserved it across generations. Shared narratives did more than inspire individuals; they bonded thousands into single armies, giving shape to chaos through marching chants, tribal names, and national myths. Only through language could warriors imagine a shared identity, a unified enemy, and a glorious future worth dying for. From Homer's 'Iliad' to Norse sagas and modern military anthems, war has always been told before it has been fought. This gendered division persisted across time and cultures. Even when women took up arms—as in revolutionary armies or guerrilla bands—the status of 'warrior' remained overwhelmingly male. From Homer to samurai epics, the ideal of the warrior has been shaped by an aesthetic of masculine exclusivity. Combat became the rite by which boys became men, a ritual rebirth through the shedding of blood—ideally, not one's own. The exclusion of women from this process was both practical and symbolic. They did not need to die to be reborn; they were instead the matrix of reproduction, the prizes of conquest, and the bearers of legitimate heirs.

The codification of warrior culture into hereditary elite castes marked the next phase of this male drama. Nowhere is this more evident than in the eerie parallels between feudal Europe and feudal Japan. In both, mounted warrior aristocracies—knights and samurai—emerged atop peasant populations. They wore armour, rode horses, and wielded swords imbued with spiritual or ancestral power. They rallied beneath banners, observed strict warrior codes, and received lands or titles through paternal inheritance. Catharina Blomberg calls the similarities 'entirely fortuitous', but in truth, they reflect the convergent evolution of military technology, male dominance, and linguistic indoctrination. As weapons became more expensive and sophisticated—bronze blades, composite bows, cavalry gear—the ability to wage war was increasingly limited to a small elite. These men were not mere hunters now, but predators within human societies. The rest of the population—peasants, artisans, miners, and women—supported their warfare through labour and tribute. In this system, the warrior was not just a fighter but a parasite. Like a virus that depends on its host, the warrior elite fed off the productivity of others while preserving the fiction of protection and honour—through narrative, education, and ritual. Warrior lineages hardened into patriarchal dynasties. Sons of warriors were raised apart, trained by male mentors, and initiated into combat as the ultimate test of identity. They 'won their spurs', 'blooded their swords', or offered trophies of slaughter as tokens of manhood. Women were doubly excluded—first from the battlefield, then from the inheritance that battlefield victory conferred. They served instead as conduits of alliance, as bodies exchanged in marriage to seal treaties or end feuds. When real genealogies failed, warriors invented them. Knights traced their bloodlines to Troy, samurai to mythical emperors, Prussian officers to Teutonic crusaders. These invented lineages of honour and blood formed 'fictive families', exclusive brotherhoods bound not by maternal nurture but by the shared experience of war. Even in modern military academies like West Point, murals and mottos reaffirm this bloodline of battle—a lineage of men forged through sacrifice, glory, and martial discipline. And again, it was language that sustained this lineage. Slogans, mottos, epics, and legends turned military service into heritage, and heritage into destiny.

Battle, like ritual sacrifice, became a sacred act. The slain were not just casualties; they were offerings to history, to the gods, or to the nation. Victory mounds mirrored altars, and the language of warfare bled into religious vocabulary. To die in battle was not mere misfortune—it was a transcendent transformation, the final test of manhood and loyalty. This sacralisation of violence ensured its endurance: war was no longer just a means to an end, but an end, a rite

of passage, a legacy to be inherited and reenacted. Modernity has done little to dislodge this structure. Even as states professionalised their armies and industrialised warfare, the gendered character of combat remained intact. Conscription pulled young men into the machinery of war under banners of duty and citizenship, but the underlying myth persisted: war is where boys become men, where courage is tested, and where honour is earned. Women may serve in combat roles today, but the cultural narrative still privileges male sacrifice and heroism. Monuments, war films, and national myths overwhelmingly portray the warrior as male, the battlefield as the proving ground of manhood. Language continues to serve as war's most powerful weapon. Propaganda, national anthems, patriotic oaths, and the very naming of enemies—these are acts of speech that generate armies out of individuals. Without words, there is no nation to defend, no honour to protect, no martyrdom to achieve. From ancient battle cries to televised speeches, the transformation of men into soldiers depends not on biology but on the power of narrative. Language does not merely describe war—it incites it, directs it, justifies it, and sanctifies its costs. War is not simply a policy decision or a tragic accident. It is a deep cultural structure—one forged in the fires of prehistoric hunts, refined through patriarchal lineage, and sustained by myth, ritual, and exclusion. As large mammals vanished and ecological niches changed, men invented new enemies and new forms of glory. War became the crucible of masculine identity, the ground on which lineages were founded and defended. And it was language—through oaths, myths, commands, and stories—that turned fighting into meaning. From the first war chants to the flags of modern nations, the logic endures: violence defines the male elite, but language makes it possible. In this sense, war is not the opposite of civilisation, but one of its founding rites. It is the stage where the performance of manhood is enacted with the highest stakes—and where its legacy is preserved and endlessly retold.

Sacralisation of war

'The soldier of Christ kills safely; he dies the more safely. He serves his own interests in dying, and Christ's interests in killing! Not without cause does he bear the sword!'
—Saint Bernard

'War is like love; it always finds a way', wrote Bertolt Brecht. But war does more than persist—it becomes sacred. In every civilisation, war has not only been justified but glorified, transfigured into divine duty, into sacrifice, into a destiny beyond individual will. What enables this transformation—what makes mass murder a moral command or a collective celebration—is language. It is language, in its most exalted and most dangerous forms—storytelling, history, mythology, religion, ideology—that has turned the carnage of war into a sacrament. It is through words that slaughter is blessed, and through narrative that soldiers are told they are saints. Combat is not sacred. It is no more noble than hunting or sport. What elevates the warrior above the mercenary or the gangster is the scaffolding of meaning that language builds around him. What separates violence from evil is explanation. As Saint Bernard understood, war becomes holy only when cloaked in ritual, symbolism, and sacred rhetoric. Throughout history, warriors have oscillated between predator and protector, horror, and hero. Gilgamesh terrorised his own people; medieval knights extorted and tormented peasants. And yet, through chronicles, hymns, and prayers, these same figures were transfigured into divine instruments. Sacred oaths, relics, and rituals did not prevent cruelty—they sanctified it. Language constructs a cosmology of conflict. It invents evil, names enemies, and ascribes metaphysical necessity to killing. The Aztec empire offers a stark example: war there existed not simply to protect or expand, but to

supply the gods with blood. Victorious soldiers were celebrated not for strategy but for procuring sacrificial bodies. Hearts were cut out to the sound of chants and drums, offered to a sun that would otherwise perish. In 19th-century West Africa, kings waged war not for land or pride, but for human lives to be publicly executed in ceremonial spectacles. The knife was guided by language—the chants of priests, the explanations of scribes, the myths that rendered the victims both necessary and holy. War became a theatre of meaning.

Over time, some major religions sought to curb this literal bloodletting. Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity began to emphasise ethical life over sacrificial death. These 'post-Axial' faiths promised peace, justice, and compassion to the downtrodden—those who had always been the meat of war. Yet even as they preached mercy, they retained the language of cosmic struggle, of divine vengeance, of holy war. Their scriptures replaced ritual slaughter with metaphor, but the metaphors could still kill. In sermons and songs, the enemy remained monstrous. The idea of evil—the myth of an irredeemable other—was preserved and deployed anew. Words became weapons. Language did not stop war. It moralised it. Christianity's early pacifism did not survive the pressures of political survival. As Europe descended into tribal war and external invasions, Augustine's doctrine of the 'just war' gave theologians the tools to reconcile divine law with military conquest. Church and sword became one. Bishops blessed weapons, banners bore saints, knights were anointed with oil. The mass was said before the charge; forgiveness was granted to those who killed for God. The Crusades completed this union of faith and blood. The Holy Land became the site of a war not just for power but for redemption. The soldier became a pilgrim, the battlefield a path to heaven. And every step was paved with words: papal decrees, holy relics, sermons, and epic poems. These were not mere propaganda—they were acts of sacralisation. The military orders—Templars, Hospitallers, Teutonic Knights—fused the monk and the murderer. They vowed poverty, chastity, and obedience—and lived to kill. They wrote chronicles that praised martyrdom in battle. Their rituals made killing a kind of prayer. The language of these orders blurred the boundary between devotion and destruction. In the Albigensian Crusade, when Christian armies attacked fellow Christians, the notorious command 'Kill them all; God will know His own' was not an act of madness—it was a linguistic justification for genocide. Words turned horror into virtue.

But language also contains its own contradiction. Just as it can sanctify power, it can inspire resistance. In France, England, and Japan, peasants rose against their lords using the deeply religious texts that had sanctified their oppression. 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?' became the rallying cry of English rebels. The Bible, the Qur'an, the sutras—all can be read against their hierarchies. Words are not neutral—they are volatile. The same stories that justify slaughter can also unmask injustice. The mythology of war can unravel itself. Still, the dominant function of language in war has been to extend it. In medieval Europe, the martial and the liturgical merged completely. Every ritual—every knighting, every blessing of armour, every burial under sacred stone—reinforced the story that war was a holy enterprise. The blood of enemies fertilised not just land but legend. The words carried across generations: from father to son, from church to battlefield, from page to altar. And so, war repeated itself. Not because it was necessary, but because it was meaningful. The rise of modernity did not silence this sacred echo. It translated it. Nationalism replaced sainthood. Revolution replaced crusade. But the structure remained. In the twentieth century, over 160 wars were fought. The flags changed, but the myths endured. Civilians became most of the

dead. Technology made killing efficient, but it did not make it profane. Propaganda films, national anthems, heroic novels—these replaced the hagiographies of saints and knights. The sacralisation of war entered secular speech. It became the grammar of patriotism, the syntax of identity. Large armies gave way to molecular violence. Irregular militias, mercenaries, and guerrillas filled the vacuum of the nation-state. But each of them carried myths. Language remained the key: manifestos, declarations, video messages, hashtags. Every rifle came with a reason. Every massacre had its justification. The evil had to be named. The enemy had to be dehumanised. The act had to be narrated. Gender boundaries also blurred. Girls fly jets, boys wield rifles, and gender equality marches under banners soaked in the same old myths. The sacred script remains. Honor, duty, sacrifice—these are not male traits, but linguistic codes. Anyone who believes the story can join the war.

Even stripped of religion, war retains its viral logic. From tribal feuds to cyberwarfare, from chariots to drones, war changes—but the stories do not. Autonomous weapons may kill without human will, but they are still launched by words. The justification, the naming of the enemy, the authorisation to kill—these are linguistic acts. No bullet flies without a sentence fired first. And so, the most evil deeds in history—the genocides, the crusades, the bombings—were not committed by beasts but by speakers. There is no atrocity without a rationale. No slaughter without a sermon. Evil, as a concept, is a linguistic invention. It is the label that permits the act. Without stories of demons, traitors, and enemies, war could not be waged. The act is not evil until it is explained as good against evil. To resist war is not just to oppose violence—it is to oppose the words that make it sacred. Twentieth-century peace movements understood this. They wrote songs, staged plays, published pamphlets, and chanted new mantras. They tried to desacralise war, to pull it down from its mythic pedestal. But the challenge remains immense. Because war is beautiful in the stories. It is glorious, tragic, noble. To unmake it, we must tell uglier truths. We must draft stories that make killing unbearable, not sublime. War has survived every attempt at obsolescence. Not because it is needed, but because it is meaningful. And language makes it meaningful. It turns flesh into symbol, death into sacrifice, and murder into memory. From Aztec hymns to Christian liturgies, from epic poems to state propaganda, language has always clothed war in glory. To win peace, we must fight the speech. We must unwrite the myths. We must desacralise the sword and revere the word. Because only when language stops blessing violence will war stop finding its way.

Dark side of language

'Power don't come from a badge or a gun. Power comes from lying. Lying big and getting the whole damn world to play along with you. Once you've got everybody agreeing with what they know in their hearts ain't true you've got 'em by the balls.'
Senator Roark, Sin city (2005)

The path of language passes through meaning to madness. From personal meaning towards collective madness. The dark side of language appears when it is used in large groups of people. When language first emerged, it was an act of communion. Words were gifts exchanged to share intentions, warn of danger, express love, and create belonging. But in mass societies, this sacred use of language has degenerated. What once forged bonds now builds barriers. In a culture driven by spectacle and manipulation, language no longer serves love and understanding—it serves power, darkness, fear, pain, pride, hubris, and guilt. It distorts reality, destabilises reason, and degrades truth. Its most profound degeneration lies not in its ability to

offend, but in its capacity to replace authentic human encounter with illusion and noise. In mass communication, the shock value of vulgarity and obscenity replaces depth. Language becomes a performance of outrage, where every grotesque insult and taboo violation is choreographed to attract attention and provoke debate. The obscene—originally meaning 'offensive to decency'—becomes a commercial tool. What was once private and sacred is paraded for profit. Transgression loses its moral edge and is refashioned as branding. The provocateur no longer rebels to unveil truth but to accumulate influence. Each new violation of norm is a bid for cultural relevance. Yet this is not rebellion—it is the theatre of rebellion, drained of risk and bloated with ego. Real subversion illuminates the human condition; false subversion packages spectacle as meaning. This descent into spectacle mirrors a deeper collapse within the creative soul. Artists, once guardians of insight, now often navigate a culture in which originality is confused with provocation. The dark side of creativity emerges when the impulse to innovate is unmoored from responsibility. To invent is noble, but when invention is fuelled by contempt and pride, it becomes pathology. The gift of new perception is paired with the curse of alienation.

The artist, armed with language and image, extends their nervous system into society. But without a moral compass, this amplification can mutate into distortion. The language of genius can become the language of madness. Writers and poets see not just what is, but what could be. Yet if they lose their tether to community, their gifts turn inward, feeding self-importance and disconnection. In rejecting convention, they risk losing compassion. The very tools meant to reveal the world can instead dismantle it. When creativity becomes destruction for its own sake, language is transformed into a hammer that smashes meaning rather than builds it. Creativity, then, demands more than vision—it requires discipline. Innovation must coexist with ethics, and imagination must be anchored in humility. Those who create must learn to govern themselves, to nurture the balance between solitude and solidarity. Language is not a mirror for the self alone. It is a vessel of mutual recognition. When used selfishly, it ceases to enlighten and begins to corrupt. Relentless speech is not a sign of vitality but of exhaustion. The most powerful creators understand the necessity of silence. In the pause between words, meaning ripens. In the restraint of speech, truth has time to emerge. Language that speaks constantly says nothing. Yet in the age of noise, restraint is rare. The modern world demands endless expression, and the creative soul is pressed to feed the machine. Paradoxically, the more we speak, the less we hear. The internet amplifies voices but diminishes meaning. Every message competes with ten thousand others. Quantity devours quality. In this marketplace of communication, language is weaponised. Words no longer express—they command, manipulate, shame, and incite. Truth is not argued—it is branded. Guilt is manufactured. Pride is inflated. Fear becomes policy. Language, estranged from love, becomes a poison. This transformation did not happen overnight. Its roots lie in the earliest acts of human conflict. The same evolutionary forces that fostered cooperation also birthed hostility. The modeling of the emergence of altruism during the Pleistocene, showed how intergroup violence shaped human behaviour. Those groups whose members were tightly bonded—altruistic toward one another and aggressive toward outsiders—were more likely to survive. 'Parochial altruism' combined self-sacrifice within the group with hostility beyond it. Loyalty and aggression co-evolved, not in contradiction, but in constructive collaboration. Language enabled this paradox. It taught us how to remember, how to tell stories about enemies and heroes, how to assign guilt, and how to elevate slaughter into sacrifice. Myth, legend, and religious narrative coded altruism as virtue

and violence as divine duty. Guilt and pride were harnessed to forge identity. The invention of 'evil' as a category—something alien, impure, corrupt—allowed societies to turn hostility into obligation. Language made moral what instinct alone could not justify.

This moral paradox—wherein language gave birth both to kindness and to cruelty—runs through all of history. It is seen in the sacred texts that preach compassion while endorsing holy war. It is visible in nation-states that celebrate peace while funding weapons. It echoes in the propaganda that stirs soldiers to kill for freedom, and in the ideologies that paint dissenters as traitors. The most destructive deeds of our species have not been committed in silence. They have been narrated, sanctified, ritualised. The genocide, the inquisition, the bombing campaign—each was accompanied by speech. The victim was named, the evil was defined, the guilt was assigned. Language did not merely report atrocity—it created the logic to make it acceptable. In 'The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War[92]' Junk-Kyoo Choi and Charles Bowles elaborate on this with their concept of co-evolution between altruism and parochialism. Their models show that neither trait thrives alone. Only in combination do they produce success in intergroup warfare. Experiments among villagers in Papua New Guinea reveal this dynamic: some participants behave as 'tolerant altruists', helping all; others act as 'parochial altruists', fiercely loyal to their own and punitive toward outsiders. These patterns cannot be explained by kinship alone. They reflect cultural transmission—how language, ritual, and storytelling embed social norms into human behaviour.

Thus, the speaking man becomes the planet's most invasive species—not because of brute force, but because of language. Language is the force multiplier of culture. It carries knowledge, but also prejudice. It spreads compassion but also hate. It encodes memory, but also myth. Powell and colleagues emphasise the role of demography in preserving culture: only when populations reach a critical size can ideas—tools, rituals, and language—be maintained. This feedback loop explains why Homo sapiens, once few, now dominate the globe. Not through strength, but through stories. Yet in telling these stories, we tell ourselves lies. We forget that language is not neutral. We act as if words are just air, harmless and weightless. But history proves otherwise. Every empire was built by speech before it was built by sword. Every war was waged in dialogue before it spilled blood. Every shame, every humiliation, every silencing—these are acts of language. The dark side of language is not that it offends, but that it imprisons. It convinces millions to kill and to die. It convinces us that guilt is virtue, and pride is strength. So, what remains of language's promise? Can it still serve communion, or has it been corrupted beyond recovery? The answer lies not in censorship but in vigilance. We must become custodians of the word. We must guard against its misuse and refuse to traffic in slogans that reduce people to enemies. We must remember that the value of language lies in its capacity to reveal—not to obscure, to unite—not to divide. If we forget this, we will continue to speak ourselves into darkness. Language was born to connect us. But in the age of mass society, it threatens to sever us completely. It is a tool more dangerous than fire or steel—because it shapes what we believe is real. If used with love, it creates peace. If used with fear, it destroys. The degeneration of language is not just a symptom of decline—it is the decline itself. It is the

[92]Choi, J.-K. and Bowles, S. (2007). The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War. Science, 318(5850), pp.636–640.

corruption of communion, the loss of meaning, and the silence of truth beneath a flood of noise. At the end, it is a matter of scale.

Language creates evil

In his remarkable 1957 essay collection 'Literature and Evil'[93] Georges Bataille insists that 'literature is not innocent', contending that only when it embraces its entanglement with the knowledge of evil can it speak with true power and depth. For Bataille, the essence of literature is not in moral instruction or entertainment, but in its confrontation with the darkest dimensions of the human condition. Language, when refined into literary form, becomes a tool for exploring violence, lust, rage, and existential dread. And it is only by plunging into this abyss that literature becomes sovereign—commanding not through virtue, but through exposure. Literature, in this view, must not serve social progress or moral comfort; it must risk madness and revelation by engaging with our impulses to harm, to dominate, to desecrate. In doing so, language reveals its double nature: both a bridge toward communion and a portal to the demonic. The act of writing becomes an act of complicity, one that demands a radical form of moral courage: not to justify evil, but to name it without flinching. Language, thus, ceases to be a neutral instrument and becomes a volatile force—capable of creation and destruction in equal measure. True literary communication, Bataille argues, is impossible without risk. The writer must vanish into the work, as the reader dissolves into the act of interpretation. In this sacred moment, the individual disappears and only language remains: raw, sovereign, and unbound. The result is not mutual understanding in the ordinary sense, but a kind of creative violence—tearing away conventions and exposing the psychic residue beneath. When language dares to abandon clarity or comfort, it ceases to be communicative in the typical sense. It becomes ecstatic, deranged, prophetic. The so-called 'mad writer' or 'visionary artist' embodies this transformation, transgressing the boundaries of acceptable discourse to forge new realities. In this state, miscommunication is not a failure—it is a signal that language has reached its outer limit and crossed into something sacred and dangerous.

At its most potent, literature is born from anguish. It thrives not in harmonious societies but in collapse—in the slippage of norms, the horror of trauma, the lure of transgression. It forces its readers into confrontations with their own unspoken desires and disowned fears. Writers become agents of rupture, unsettling our pretences with scenes of eroticism, decay, cruelty, and absurdity. Language reveals the cracks, not its cohesive logic. This destabilising effect is not accidental—it is the very purpose of the artistic gesture. The writer does not build up; they dismantle. Literature, in this sense, is a machine for moral inquiry that begins in pain and ends in ambiguity. Through suffering, shame, and perversion, language acquires its full tragic depth—no longer a mirror for virtue, but a canvas for monstrosity. Transgressive art, as a genre, deliberately courts this degenerative power of language. To transgress is to cross a line—not just socially or politically, but metaphysically. Transgression becomes a linguistic ritual—a dark liturgy that recruits its audience as initiates into a forbidden priesthood. Rituals of power and secrecy reappear in the language—coded, fractured, perverse—are not accidental. They are engineered to elicit loyalty through confusion, to forge allegiance through dread. In

[93] Bataille, G. (1973). Literature and Evil.

some circles, language ceases to be a shared code and becomes an incantation—a way to manipulate reality through carefully crafted aberration. Surrealism, too, pursued this descent into the grotesque. The unconscious must speak and dream logic is elevated above rationality, calling for a 'sur-reality' where contradictions fuse. In surrealist works, images crash against each other like waves: broken dolls, bleeding clocks, melting faces. The 'grotesque'—once a term for decorative excess in Roman art—now becomes a mode for existential alarm. Its disproportion and distortion are meant to awaken us. These are not aesthetic decisions but moral shocks, intended to break the tyranny of the ordinary. Such art has no room for harmony; its purpose is rupture, to summon what has been exiled to the subconscious. Shock is not a means of amusement, but of initiation. Only through revulsion can we come to see. Language here serves not to clarify, but to rupture—to fracture consensus and let in the sublime horror of truth.

Yet this descent has limits, and not all transgression is legitimate. There is a difference between art that reveals and art that merely wounds. When the language of art spills into the language of politics, the boundary between fiction and violence grows thin. What begins as symbolic transgression becomes real-world cruelty. In such cases, the absolution of art is no longer sufficient. When evil moves from the page to the street, we are forced to ask: what has language unleashed? Transgressive literature—may intend to remain symbolic, but its aesthetic of nihilism risks glamorising the very behaviours it depicts. And in a society increasingly driven by viral media, shock has no clear limits. The logic of transgression becomes self-replicating: each new work must outdo the last. Eventually, language becomes a theatre of perpetual escalation—a spiral of outrage in which meaning is sacrificed for spectacle. The transgressive hero often takes the form of an alienated, antisocial voice: cold, ironic, violent, or simply numb. Such characters are not aberrations—they are prototypes of postmodern identity. They navigate a world of broken taboos and fractured norms, revealing a deeper truth: evil is not some foreign substance but an element of ourselves. In 1963, Michel Foucault’s 'Preface to Transgression' reframed this confrontation with taboo as the engine of human freedom. To cross every line was not to fall, but to ascend—toward sovereignty, toward truth. But what does this freedom serve? Transgressive art often unites its followers through a shared sense of revulsion. 'We who understand this darkness', it says, 'belong together'. It creates cults of the initiated—those willing to stare into the abyss and name what others will not. Yet every tribe needs a boundary. Division is essential to the function of transgression: you cannot rebel without something to rebel against. As such, the power of language lies in its binary nature. It separates 'us' from 'them', 'pure' from 'impure', 'hero' from 'villain'. Language, then, is the birthplace of evil—not in the ethical sense, but as a mechanism of exclusion. To name the outsider is to cast the first stone. Evil is not a supernatural force—it is the product of linguistic division, of the endless need to delineate one self against another.

In our digital age, this tendency reaches its apex. Language fragments into tweets, slogans, memes—each a unit of meaning designed not for understanding, but for reaction. Data is collected in binary: yes or no, friend or foe, good or evil. Entire systems of control are built on this fragmentation. Villains are manufactured by algorithm; consent is rallied through linguistic panic. Language, once the medium of communion, becomes the apparatus of control. Surveillance is linguistic: your likes, clicks, and keywords become the map of your self. In this system, evil is not done by monsters but by interfaces. It is coded, modular, invisible. We must acknowledge that digital language is not innocent. Its complexity does not elevate us—it multiplies our capacity for domination, shame, and manipulation. To redeem it, we must pass

through its darkest chambers, see what it has become, and imagine what it might still be. Only by confronting language's complicity in evil can we hope to reshape it—not into a weapon, but into a new form of communion. Language, in its highest refinement, does not only liberate—it corrupts. As it grows in nuance and abstraction, it begins to articulate what instinct cannot: cruelty, humiliation, obsession, destruction. Literature and art, when honest, become accomplices in this descent, guiding us through the shadows with unflinching gaze. Yet in doing so, they offer not damnation but transformation. Evil does not originate outside us; it emerges from the names we give, the stories we tell, the lines we draw. The future of language—and of humanity—depends on our willingnfull seduction of its darker powers. Speech cannot back return to its original promise: not as domination, but as shared becoming. The sovereignty of speech is a dangerous notion, it means independence from human laws and morals.

The essence of evil

Evil is not a primal force lurking in the depths of human nature—it is a linguistic construction, born from the same power that builds civilisations and commands armies. Language is the house of Being, as Heidegger declared, but it is also the home of evil. In language Being and evil live together. Only through language can we understand, define, and propagate evil. It does not exist independently in nature; it is a concept that requires language to come into being. It is a judgement, a classification of behaviour as profoundly immoral, and it relies entirely on the existence of moral frameworks, which themselves are made of words, grammar, and narratives. To call something evil is not to describe an essence but to impose one, to pass judgement in accordance with laws and values that only exist because language made them possible. The concept of evil exists nowhere outside of speech. What we call evil is a product of moral codes, religious rules, and legal norms—all articulated and transmitted through language. Without language, there is no morality, and without morality, there is no evil. Even the most horrific act is not 'evil' in itself; it becomes evil when a society, through language, defines it as such. This is why evil grows in the shadow of language: the more elaborate our linguistic systems become, the more sophisticated our notions of guilt, punishment, and wickedness. Language provides not only the labels but also the entire structure in which moral condemnation can take place. Evil grows larger in groups of people who share a common language. In every civilisation, from ancient empires to modern nation-states, language has served both as a building block of culture and a tool for moral order. Through shared vocabulary and moral narratives, entire populations are conditioned to fear, hate, or punish certain behaviours or individuals. Mass communication turns evil into a public concept—a social threat to be contained. Just as language enables law and poetry, it also enables propaganda and demonisation. War begins with words: slogans, speeches, manifestos. Before the first shot is fired, language has already shaped the enemy as evil and the army as righteous. Evil is thus not just judged—it is manufactured, strategically deployed to unite some people and alienate others. In the name of good, evil is named, repeated, and enforced.

The need for evil is functional. It stabilises societies by designating a moral boundary. What would law be without transgression? What would religion be without sin? Evil provides a contrast, a shadow against which good is illuminated. Without the language of evil, we lose the very tools by which we construct moral life. But in constructing it, we also construct fear. Fear of punishment, fear of deviation, fear of the other. Evil becomes the price we pay for order. It does not emerge naturally; it is summoned by the act of naming. The witch, the heretic, the

traitor, the criminal—all are created in the act of saying their name. In ancient literature and philosophy, the danger of truth was already tied to the danger of knowledge. The wisdom of Silenus, recorded in fragments from Aristotle and echoed by Sophocles, speaks to a dark insight: that to be born is itself a misfortune. This antinatalist thought—that non-existence is preferable to life—expresses a horror at human suffering that language alone makes thinkable. Without speech, the thought cannot form; without words, there is no curse, no lamentation. Writers such as Flaubert, Schopenhauer, and later Cioran would echo this dread. But it is language that holds it. The despair, the moral weight of existence, is not a purely emotional response—it is a constructed reflection. The human animal suffers, but only the human speaker suffers with full knowledge of suffering and gives it a name. For Heidegger, language is not just a means of communication—it is the very medium through which being is revealed. We dwell in language; it is the structure of our world. Language gathers reality and offers it to us as meaningful. But this very act of gathering is also an act of excluding. To say what something is, is also to say what it is not. Binaries arise: good and evil, true, and false, self, and other. The house of being becomes the house of division. Once these oppositions are named, they take on a life of their own. Evil exists only in relation to good, and it must be continuously named and re-named to keep that opposition alive.

Language is not merely expressive—it is performative. To call an action evil is to do something with that word: to judge, to condemn, to punish. Law, theology, and politics all rely on these performative judgments. When we describe someone as evil, we do more than report—we enact a ritual of separation. We remove them from the realm of the human. This is why public discourse so often reaches for the term 'evil': it is the ultimate expression of moral distance. And in doing so, it generates power. The speaker gains authority, the audience gains clarity, and the condemned loses their claim to empathy. In this way, language governs our ethical life, not by reason alone but by its power to declare. This is why literature, philosophy, and even science must reckon with language's dual nature. Language is our most profound gift, but it is also our greatest threat. Heidegger warned of its danger: it stands apart from the world and introduces delusion. Yet it also allows beings to show themselves, to matter. Poetry, in this sense, becomes the purest form of language—it lets being emerge without dominating it. But even poetry is not innocent. As Georges Bataille said, literature is not innocent. It carries within it the knowledge of evil. It thrives on the taboo, the transgressive, the dark. Only when it touches the forbidden does it gain intensity. Evil is not outside literature—it is its secret heart. Structuralism and post-structuralism added further insight. Structural linguistics taught that meaning is created not by individual words but by their position in a system of differences. Evil, then, is not a substance but a position—a slot in a moral grid. Post-structuralists like Derrida showed that no such structure is stable. The meaning of evil shifts, and its location in the grid changes with ideology and discourse. What was once called evil may now be called justice, and vice versa. This instability reveals that evil has no essence apart from its linguistic role. It is a necessary fiction that serves different masters across time.

In the digital age, this fiction becomes even more volatile. Online discourse spreads accusations of evil like wildfire, and language becomes the weapon of choice. Cancel culture, moral outrage, public shaming—all function through the rapid assignment of moral categories. Words like 'toxic', 'abuser', or 'traitor' trigger a cascade of consequences. Here again, evil is not observed—it is spoken into being. Technology merely amplifies what language has always done: create meaning, impose order, and exclude the unfit. Finally, evil is not a fact of nature.

It is a necessity of speech. It arises when we assign meaning to suffering, wrongdoing, and fear. It crystallises in the legal codes, religious commandments, and public condemnations that shape human communities. Language gives it form, sustains it through repetition, and uses it to police the boundaries of belonging. We need the concept of evil to stabilise morality, but we must also recognise that in naming it, we create it. The essence of evil, then, is not in the act but in the naming. Language does not merely reflect evil—it produces it. To understand evil is not to look deeper into the heart but to listen more carefully to the words. It is to ask how judgments arise, how narratives are shaped, and how names become sentences. Language is our house—but in that house, evil also dwells. It waits in every moral rule, every binary opposition, every tale of virtue and transgression. It is not beyond speech; it is speech. And only by questioning the words we use to judge can we ever hope to disarm it.

A constructed reality

Language can create worlds more convincing than any machine. You do not need the Matrix's batteries and neural links—just words, myths, slogans, ideologies. These linguistic towers—whether religion, politics, science, or economics—build imagined realities that feel as real as bricks and mortar. Without hope and rife with despair, such language can distort individuals and entire societies until cities collapse into collective madness, like the asylum in Chekhov's 'Ward No. 6'. Whoever controls the narrative controls the sanity of the many. Language, at its best, gives shape to truth. At its worst, it can hollow out meaning. In ruination, words become weapons without purpose. When delivered from the mouths of authority figures or mass media, despairing stories of decline, betrayal, or apocalypse become self-fulfilling prophecies. Repetition of such talk warps shared perception—until hope itself disappears, and lives unravel. People begin to walk blindly through their days, as if a slow mental decay has been imposed by language alone. Chekhov's 'Ward No. 6' offers a grim parable. Dr. Ragin, elite physician and man of reason, drifts into apathy and philosophical detachment. He surrounds himself with talk of suffering that does not feel personal—abstract words that numb empathy. Patients like Gromov live this talk, bound by despair made credible by the same language that once formed medicine and civics. When Ragin finally internalises those narratives—when he hears despair not as theory but as reality—he stops just short of madness before literally succumbing. His transformation reveals how language can engineer an entire mental collapse, not through violence but through relentless speech and thought. The story foreshadows a modern disease of discourse: the rise of language saturated by despondency. Experts, pundits, and elites spin tales of decline, crisis, and decay. The message is everywhere: 'No future', 'Everything is falling apart', 'Save the earth, don't give birth'. The more this is repeated, the more it becomes part of the 'common sense'—the constructed reality of society. When people live in that shared depression, they act accordingly. Neighbourhoods die, institutions decay, communities fragment. The language constructs the reality, and the reality becomes inevitable.

This pattern emerged in the Enlightenment, where hope blossomed alongside reason: 'sapere aude'—dare to know. But it also produced its opposite: the Counter-Enlightenment. Romantic thinkers began to reject progress for nostalgia and gloom. They rejected rationalism in favour of feeling, and gradually, suspicion, despair, and mysticism replaced hope. Language, once a scaffold for growth, became a tool for retreat. Words like 'decadence', 'crisis', and 'entropy' crept into public discourse, sharpening the sense that categories built with faith—liberty, fraternity—had already failed. Ironic slogans and cynical aphorisms turned the idealist's vocabulary into weapons against critique itself. In 'The Social Construction of Reality: A

Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge' (1966), Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued that social reality is constructed through repeated interaction—the conversational cement of meaning. Institutionalised speech becomes a habit. When these habits are soaked in negativity, false assumptions, or division, they harden into frameworks of despair. Phrases like 'we're screwed', 'all politicians lie', or 'society is broken' layer over daily life. They steer public behaviour and feeling—even when facts contradict them. Once installed, these narratives frame everything else. You do not just lose hope—you lose the language to conceive hope, and with it, the categories of possibility. This is how cities become madhouses. If the buildings remain standing, the shared imagination collapses. A megalopolis can host thriving economies and brilliant arts—but if citizens live in a linguistic environment permeated by fear, blame, and resignation, then the spirit fades. You find Professor Ragin figures everywhere: educated, well-paid people circling around despair, repeating liturgies of weariness in meetings, monologues, and social media. Each repetition advances the ward's walls.

The cure lies in changing the language—not by ignoring facts, but by shifting imagination. Hope is not blind denial; it is the creation of new vocabularies and collective visions that invite agency. You need stories like 'We've faced worse before and prevailed'. You need niches where people speak of rebuilding, not collapse. You need structural metaphors—gardens, communities, renewal—to reclaim the symbolic centre. Real change happens when narrative shifts toward possibility, ambition, and receipt of responsibility, rather than despair. The system that traps individuals is rooted in language that normalises madness. When you learn to see the machinery of constructed despair, you begin to dismantle it. You remove the chains of words one by one. The ward cracks open. The city breathes again. This is the battleground of the present. Digital technologies flood us not with windows on the world but with repetitive affirmations of doom. Algorithms prefer despair—it drives traffic. Outrage has more shareability than hope. But hope can be rebuilt through language. Vocabulary is political; metaphors matter. The terms we use to describe 'the crisis' shape how cities act. If we define ourselves as 'running out' or 'destroyed', we become so. If we call ourselves 'resilient, proceeding, renewing', we open space for action. Language is not a neutral medium—it is a force. It can preserve sanity or construct a lunatic asylum, even in a thriving democracy. Civilisation teeters at the edge of madness when despair is preached as truth. But if we learn to intervene in language—if we critique our own metaphors, invent new ones, and resist the monetisation of fear—we can repair the rupture. No systems are too complex to escape. Narratives can be rewritten. Doom becomes data, and data can become design. We need narratives of repair, collaboration, regenerative economics, and circular systems. Tiny nodes of positive language can propagate like vaccination—each new conversation weakening despair and strengthening conviction. 'A constructed reality' demands vigilance. Anyone who controls the narratives controls whether society remains hopeful or decaying. We must guard against the architecture of despair that builds quietly in boardrooms, newsrooms, and social media feeds. Naming the trap is the first step. Then comes the work of constructing new stories that align with human dignity. Chekhov's 'Ward No. 6' reminds us that intellectual detachment, maintained too long, becomes self-destruction.

The remedy lies in using language as a source of engagement and compassion, not detachment. One must speak his hopes, not just his woes. People must create rooms full of words that heal rather than punish, that connect rather than isolate. Only then can we reclaim our shared world—and our shared language. In his 'Questions sur les miracles' (1765), Voltaire warns how power corrupts the inner voices of judgment. His claim—'whoever can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities'—is not merely rhetorical. It reveals the logic of submission: once the mind accepts the impossible, the heart can be led to accept the

unforgivable. When belief is severed from reason, morality becomes malleable. Religious and ideological crimes, for Voltaire, do not begin with violence but with irrational obedience to language. The surrender of thought precedes the surrender of conscience.

'Formerly there were those who said: You believe things that are incomprehensible, inconsistent, impossible because we have commanded you to believe them; go then and do what is unjust because we command it. Such people show admirable reasoning. Truly, whoever can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities. If the God-given understanding of your mind does not resist a demand to believe what is impossible, then you will not resist a demand to do wrong to that God-given sense of justice in your heart. As soon as one faculty of your soul has been dominated, other faculties will follow as well. And from this derives all those crimes of religion which have overrun the world'.
Voltaire's 'Questions sur les miracles[94]' (1765)

The risk society

A society does not inherit its structure from fate, biology, or even history—it inherits it from its own imagination. The language we speak, the stories we tell, and the categories we accept shape the very architecture of social life. Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society compels us to see that the future is not determined by the risks we face, but by how we describe them. Narratives are not innocent; they structure the horizon of possibility. If society is built from language, then the kinds of lives we can lead are determined by the grammar of our hopes and the syntax of our fears. In Beck's risk society, the dangers we face—nuclear war, environmental collapse, pandemics—are not natural catastrophes, but human-made uncertainties. These are not accidents; they are engineered side effects of progress. But what makes them powerful is not their materiality—it is the way they are named, publicised, denied, or normalised. The control of mass communication, more than the control of any physical resource, determines how people imagine what is safe, what is dangerous, and what is worth sacrificing. Risk, like everything else, is a linguistic event before it is a material fact. The role of sociology in such a world is no longer to explain society from a distance but to engage with the scripts that define it. Zygmunt Bauman reminds us that too often sociologists become bureaucrats of imagination—writing authorised interpretations of reality that serve institutions rather than individuals. What we need is not a new sociology of prediction, but a sociology of storytelling. If the world is a screenplay, who is the director? Who is the audience? And who holds the pen? The key lies in the stories we choose to accept. The Enlightenment once promised that reason would lead us to freedom, but today reason is entangled in systems that produce risk for some and privilege for others. Scientific rationality, once a language of emancipation, now speaks through opaque networks of expertise and administration. Its authority is no longer self-evident; it must be continually narrated into legitimacy. Counter-Enlightenment movements—Romanticism, traditionalism, populism—did not arise merely as political resistance but as linguistic responses. They offered alternative narratives, myths of lost purity, dignity, and rootedness. Some of these turned toxic, yet their success proves a vital point: people do not organise their lives around data but around meaning.

To live well in a risk society, we must begin to speak differently. We must replace fatalistic scripts of inevitable decline with stories of resilience and responsibility. Just as

[94] Torrey, Norman Lewis (1961). Les Philosophes: The Philosophers of the Enlightenment and Modern Democracy. Perigee Books.

societies once told themselves myths of divine kings or chosen peoples, we must now invent a narrative of shared vulnerability and mutual care. A sustainable future requires a sustainable imagination. In 'Childhood and Society'(1950) Erik Erikson warned that in a world driven by consumerism and quantification, people lose the distinction between having and being. Identity becomes a property, a label, a commodity. 'I have a job', 'I have followers', 'I have worth'. But what about being? In the 'to have' mode, people become inventories of traits rather than participants in relationships. Their value is defined externally, and their stories are no longer authored from within. Identity is always a risk. It requires standing for something not given, something not guaranteed. To be oneself is to speak a new language, not just repeat inherited roles. But in our age of systems, many drift from office to office, not as persons but as files, cases, and digits in a database. Here, Beck's insight returns: whoever controls the language of risk controls the value of a person. If you can name someone as deviant, unsafe, or unproductive, you can erase them socially—no jail required. Only a word. A different society is possible. Not one without risks, but one that distributes them more justly. This will not happen through law alone—it begins with changing how we speak about ourselves. From 'citizen' to 'consumer' is a collapse in language. To recover political agency, we must recover narrative agency. We must write new scripts in which dignity is not indexed to productivity, and risk is not outsourced to the voiceless. The world of modern humans was never one of settled identities. As Marshall McLuhan wrote, the hunter's world was one of movement, adaptation, and alertness. To hunt is to live in improvisation—not to manage a system but to meet the world as it comes. Hunters live without guarantees. Their survival depends not on permanence but on sensitivity. And in the modern media environment, where stories hunt minds and symbols shape behaviour, we are again returned to that primal task: paying attention, improvising meaning, and remaining awake. Print culture forged a public sphere, uniting strangers in shared language. But television and the internet do not unite—they fragment. They return us to tribalism, but without intimacy. Now the 'public' is a managed hallucination, a target market, an analytics chart. The medium that once demanded deep attention now floods us with shallow distraction. And in the process, we lose our voices to voices more algorithmically optimised than ours. To reclaim narrative is to reclaim agency. We must learn to draw again—to mark the world with intention. Language must become a tool not just for transmitting information but for creating presence. As in art, the value of a sentence is not what it describes, but what it evokes.

David Graeber and David Wengrow, in 'The Dawn of Everything'(2021), tell us that inequality was never a biological destiny. Human groups shifted between egalitarianism and hierarchy depending on context, season, ritual, and belief. Language was always central. It was language that turned gifts into debts, relatives into servants, and memories into laws. It was language that first codified power, and it is language that can unmake it. This is the promise of the risk society: to see that the future is not yet written. And that even our deepest inequalities can be transformed—not through revolution alone, but through revision. A civilisation that wishes to survive must become literate again in its own fictions. For every entrenched injustice, there once existed a story that made it seem necessary. To build a better world, we must become storytellers again—courageous enough to name a different kind of life. True civilisation is not the endless accumulation of power but the wisdom to alternate between solitude and communion, hierarchy and sharing. Our ancestors did this seasonally. Today, we are trapped in static roles. People have forgotten that every structure is temporary, that every city was once a camp, that every empire began with a myth. If inequality feels eternal, it is because we have stopped imagining its alternatives. Citizens no longer play with power—they submit to it. But play is a political act. It reveals that rules are chosen, not given. And once revealed, they can be rewritten. Societies are stuck not with inequality, but with the language that justifies it. Families

became laboratories of coercion, turning care into control. Possessions became signs of virtue. Titles replaced names. Over time, language turned life into property and property into identity. And that is the root of risk: not the threat of catastrophe, but the threat that we will accept it as normal. A different society is possible. But only if we speak it first. A different language means a different world, but necessarily a better one. The risk society is not just a phase of modernity—it is a linguistic condition. Risk becomes unbearable not when it grows too large, but when it becomes unspeakable. Inequality becomes permanent not when it is unstoppable, but when it becomes unnameable. The stories we tell determine the futures we inherit. If we want a society with less risk and more equality, we must begin by speaking differently—by rejecting the fatalism of existing scripts and writing new ones grounded in dignity, imagination, and care. Whoever controls the narrative controls the structure of reality. And so, to transform the world, we must begin not by seizing power—but by reclaiming the pen.

'The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently.'

-David Graeber, Adam Curtis's BBC documentary series, 'Can't Get You Out of My Head'

4. Pathology of indoctrination

Genealogy of speech

Every language carries within it the seeds of its own undoing. Speech is not merely a tool of communication—it is the engine of a cycle that begins with conspiracy, peaks in indoctrination, settles into consensus, and then collapses into its own shadow, ready to begin again. This is the genealogy of speech: a recurring pattern in every polity, movement, tribe, and digital echo chamber. It is driven less by material conditions than by the narratives constructed—and the human hunger for order. Conspiracy marks the initial stage. It asserts that everything taught is false. The powerful deceive. The truth remains hidden. Conspiracies thrive in the fertile ground of secrecy and exclusion, particularly among those marginalised or alienated. The conspiratorial mindset revels in forbidden knowledge—secret meetings, hidden documents, coded messages. Its energy does not derive from facts but from the thrill of rebellion against accepted norms. Language becomes weaponised. Words form enclaves of suspicion—whispers, memes, chants, rituals that bind initiates and repel outsiders. Yet conspiracy alone cannot endure. It must evolve. The next stage is indoctrination—when the subversive narrative becomes doctrine. The story gains structure, polish, and institutional tone. It now attracts those who consider themselves thoughtful and discerning. Indoctrination no longer depends on secrecy but draws authority from its presentation. Adherents place trust in their refined inner voice and ridicule the conspiratorial mind as chaotic and crude. At this point, language is codified: frameworks, curricula, hashtags, citations, and sermons emerge. Authority is not imposed by force but by repetition—rhetorical rhythm, logical scaffolding, and media cycles that shape belief. Both conspiracy and indoctrination feed on repetition—not of content, but of cadence—a liturgical beat that separates believers from sceptics. Division, not unity, becomes the strategic function. In each case, language manufactures identity. The conspirator feels elevated by access to hidden truth. The indoctrinated feels superior in rejecting outsider folly. But the result remains the same: a closed group governed by language and belief.

The ruling principle is not merely domination, but shaping—language establishes consensus and channels groups toward shared objects of reverence. These may be trivial or monumental: a cathedral, a slogan, a formula, a national anthem, or an abstract ideal like

'progress'. Often, the practical meaning fades. What remains is a symbol—pure beauty, sacrifice, or order. Narrative complexity rises. Layers of commentary form. Traditions build upon one another. Eventually, no single individual fully grasps the totality of the ideological structure. Meaning diminishes as structure grows. The peak of the cycle comes when indoctrination congeals into consensus. At this stage, the doctrine no longer needs persuasion. It is perceived as natural. Its language saturates institutions, schools, media, and casual speech. Its origins are forgotten; its assumptions go unchallenged. Compliance becomes habitual. Legitimacy no longer justifies itself—it simply exists. The cathedral has been completed. The myth performed. The script internalised. Yet success sows decay. The system becomes inert. Belief becomes ritual. Speech hardens into jargon. The grand narrative collapses under its complexity and rigidity. At this moment, dissent stirs. Somewhere, someone begins to question the orthodoxy, whisper alternatives, suggest that reality is otherwise. A new conspiracy is born. The cycle recommences: Conspiracy. Indoctrination. Consensus. Collapse. Conspiracy.

This cycle is linguistic before it is political. Its engine is not ideology but rhetoric. Shifts occur through stories, chants, headlines, memes, and coded expressions. Power flows through those who control the discourse—from sacred texts to corporate presentations, from political manifestos to algorithmic suggestions. Novelty governs the process. Attention follows news more than truth. A new phrase, a surprising claim, a counterintuitive metaphor—these hold more influence than sober fact. Both conspiracy and indoctrination exploit novelty. Language is constantly updated: updated terms, revised histories, refreshed imagery. As novelty accelerates, the cycle spins faster. Only specialists can navigate the lexicon of any ideology. These ideologies become mazes. Every attempt at coherence adds complexity. Schools, sects, institutions, and parties layer over one another. At a certain point, linguistic complexity reaches a threshold where meaning becomes unreachable. The priests of the system speak in tongues the public no longer understands. The average person cannot express themselves without navigating code, jargon, or threat. All becomes encoded, layered, obscure, or authoritarian. Consensus ossifies into dead language. Once it fails, the cycle begins again. A new conspiracy takes root—not from irrationality, but from cultural amnesia. No one remembers how the previous structure was born. History blurs. The language of the old order grows impenetrable. New stories surface from the margins. Initially absurd, they attract followers. Symbols, chants, rituals emerge. The pattern reforms. Language is not neutral in this process. Its ecology determines whether speech connects or commands. When communication becomes code—legal, political, technical—genuine connection collapses. Individuals speak to roles, not to other people. Meaning breaks in transmission. Strategy buries sincerity. The medium becomes a prison. An alternative does not lie in escaping language but in reforming its function. Polyphony—multiple voices—can interrupt the cycle. Shared discourse spaces can delay or soften the hardening of conspiracy into indoctrination. Self-aware storytelling, resistant to orthodoxy, can keep the pattern alive without calcifying. Above all, sincerity and simplicity in language have the potential to puncture the illusion of control.

What then are the laws of novelty in language? Novelty—defined as the sheer presence of the new—carries more force than truth or coherence. Consider the syntax of Master Yoda: ancient ideas gain appeal through syntactic surprise. Novelty itself is neither moral nor immoral. It draws strength from contradiction until saturation leads to collapse. As societies seek stability through tradition, novelty accelerates. Old ideologies crumble, while commerce, media, and politics generate new layers of linguistic excess. These systems grow ornate—too complex to function—eventually demanding deconstruction. Novelty quickens toward an imagined climax, not unlike a countdown, but the true revelation lies in the pattern. Ideologies evolve in similar fashion. Initially meant as systems for studying ideas, they morph into prescriptive codes

repeated until they feel inevitable. Through repetition, they mimic nature's own cycles—mutating, expanding, imploding. Each burst of novelty plants the next seed. In this churn, language shifts from a vehicle for meaning into a spectacle of transformation. Only a grasp of novelty's logic enables navigation through the whirl of modern discourse.

The conspiracy of speech is not an irreversible doom. Each loop in the cycle can be altered, slowed, or redirected. Conspiracy may become dialogue. Indoctrination may become reflection. Consensus may become collaboration. All hinges on the structure of language. When speech divides, collapse follows. When it dominates, failure ensues. But when treated as a shared tool for meaning-making—fragile, adaptable, and open—it becomes a force for relationship rather than rule. Speech is not simply a reflection of belief. It generates worlds. Its genealogies are society's architecture. Understanding the cycle allows the metaphor to be chosen carefully and the foundation to be restored. Clarity, rhythm, and repetition carry weight. Yet above all, meaning must remain central—not imposed meaning, but discovered, recovered, and exchanged. No doctrine lasts forever. Every linguistic system will face its reckoning. The genealogy of speech exposes not a flaw in language, but its deepest nature: the perpetual transformation of belief into structure, structure into control, control into breakdown, and breakdown into new belief. Language cannot escape the cycle—but it can reveal it. In that revelation lies the first trace of freedom. The genealogy of speech traces a linguistic cycle of recurring stupidity, where conspiracy breeds indoctrination, and consensus calcifies into dogma—only to collapse and begin again. Intelligence appears briefly, in moments of doubt or satire, but is soon swallowed by the machinery of repetition and belief. These fleeting awakenings rarely halt the cycle; at best, they illuminate its absurdity. Language, for all its promise, remains the stage on which folly endlessly performs.

Intelligence and Stupidity

Language is not merely a mirror of thought; it is the primary scaffolding upon which all human reasoning, coordination, and misjudgement is built. Intelligence and stupidity, far from being abstract or isolated traits, are linguistically structured modes of behaviour and perception. Every act of cognition is shaped, limited, or empowered by the words we use and the models they encode. This linguistic infrastructure forms not only the basis of knowledge and understanding but also of error, confusion, and destructive overconfidence. Intelligence, in this view, is not just the ability to learn or solve problems but to create and refine internal models of reality using language. These models allow agents—humans, animals, machines—to anticipate, simulate, and act meaningfully. Turing's imitation game, for instance, defined intelligence as the linguistic ability to convince an observer of one's humanity. Yet critics rightly pointed out that emotional nuance, historical awareness, and affective coherence also matter. Using structural coupling organisms develop meaning through dynamic linguistic and behavioural feedback with their environments. The intelligent use of language is not simply accurate or clever; it is responsive, adaptive, and continuously self-correcting. Stupidity, by contrast, is not merely the absence of intelligence. It is the systematic misuse of language and internal models to harm both self and others. Carlo Cipolla's famous test measures stupidity along two axes: harm or benefit to oneself, and harm or benefit to others. When individuals repeatedly act in ways that diminish both, they exhibit stupidity as a kind of recursive, self-perpetuating failure. It is not ignorance alone that defines this mode but a confident misuse of communicative patterns—rules, stories, slogans—that blind rather than clarify. When Cipolla's four types—intelligent, bandit, naïve, stupid—are extended to account for intention, a broader taxonomy emerges. Some individuals help others unintentionally while seeking personal gain;

others cause harm to everyone without malice, simply through incompetence. This 'Social Wheel[95]' maps stupidity not as a binary but as a spectrum structured through language: from manipulative rhetoric to unreflective cliché, from dangerous overconfidence to wilful miscomprehension. Importantly, those classified as incapable often surpass the stupid in harm, precisely because their misuse of language and thought goes unrecognised and unchallenged.

This framework reveals a deeper educational imperative. Intelligence must be cultivated not through isolated content but through the training of linguistic habits: the constant revision of models, the capacity to name complexity without collapsing it into simplification, and the humility to question one's own understanding. Alan Sokal's parody hoax on postmodern academic language succeeded because it exposed how certain linguistic forms had become disconnected from coherent models of meaning—how entire communities could be persuaded by the tone of intelligence, even when content was absent. In both classrooms and boardrooms, the power to shape meaning resides in one's control over linguistic structure. Yet language's power cuts both ways. In 'Studying stupidity – the smart move? [96]' Anthony Montgomery reminds us that society does not treat stupidity with the same urgency as poverty or disease. No public institution sets out to eradicate stupidity, despite its foundational role in disasters such as Hillsborough, Grenfell, or the 2008 financial collapse. Why? Perhaps because stupidity implicates everyone. It thrives on mental shortcuts—heuristics, cognitive biases, and groupthink—that turn language into a mask of reason rather than its expression. Psychology has devoted heroic effort to understanding intelligence, but this focus has overshadowed a more pervasive phenomenon. Perhaps we are simply too embarrassed to examine our collective folly. Reluctancy to look in the mirror? Across psychology, a common theme is our reliance on mental shortcuts—heuristics and biases—to navigate complexity. Daniel Kahneman's distinction between automatic and effortful thinking reveals how easily decision makers fool themselves into believing they are reasoning when they are merely reacting. Language used rapidly and intuitively can sound coherent without being rational. Group settings—whether corporations or governments—amplify this effect. Words become instruments of social coordination, not truth. Buzzwords, branding, and managerial jargon often produce what Mats Alvesson and André Spicer term 'functional stupidity' in their article[97] 'A Stupidity-Based Theory of Organisations'. A condition where organisations actively suppress critical thinking in favour of streamlined, unquestioned speech. Consultants and experts become agents of repetition rather than insight, pushing rule-based language systems that hinder rather than help decision-making. Some define stupidity as the application of rule systems where increased information makes outcomes worse. Unlike ignorance, stupidity is structured—linguistically encoded and reinforced. Its practitioners follow protocols, apply categories, and speak authoritatively, but their discourse leads further away from truth. Intelligence, on the other hand, operates with simpler, adaptive rules capable of grasping complexity without being engulfed by it. Intelligence speaks with clarity; stupidity with certainty.

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[95] Mella, P. (2017). Intelligence and Stupidity —The Educational Power of Cipolla's Test and of the 'Social Wheel'. Creative Education, [online] 08(15), pp.2515–2534. doi:https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2017.815174.

[96] BPS. (2024). Studying stupidity – the smart move? [online] Available at: https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/studying-stupidity-smart-move [Accessed 19 May 2025].

[97] Alvesson, M. and Spicer, A. (2012). A Stupidity-Based Theory of Organizations. Journal of Management Studies, 49(7), pp.1194–1220. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2012.01072.x.

Stupidity's most dangerous form is extremism. People with the strongest opinions on hot topics in the news often knew the least, while believing they knew the most. Their linguistic behaviour—assertive, confident, polarising—mirrored the Dunning-Kruger effect: the least competent overestimate their knowledge and express it with the most rhetorical force. This pattern is not accidental. Language, once disconnected from epistemic humility, becomes a weapon of false certainty. Philosophers, playwrights, and novelists have long diagnosed this. Bertrand Russell's 1933 essay 'The Triumph of Stupidity' blamed Adolf Hitler's rise on the 'organised fervour of stupid and brutal people', observing that 'the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt'. Moral posturing often prolongs problems rather than solving them. Drama, from ancient tragedy to modern political satire, reveals how words become complicit in atrocity when detached from reflection. Humanities disciplines—so often sidelined by scientific empiricism—retain the unique power to interrogate linguistic stupidity in its cultural forms. Stupidity, however, is not simply a failure of individual cognition. It is systemic. Universities critique the publishing industry while sustaining it through unpaid labour. Environmentalists argue for drastic change while continuing to fly. Policy circles discuss inequality while maintaining economic structures that reinforce it. These contradictions are not signs of hypocrisy alone, but of linguistic failure: slogans, policies, and theories repeat without producing corresponding action. Language becomes inert, circular, and performative.

What can be done? First of all stupidity must be admitted and accepted even among the academia and the high brows. The study of 'stupidology', far from being a satire, offers real promise. If language encodes error as easily as truth, then the discipline of intelligence must begin with rhetorical ethics. This includes recognising the traps of overused metaphors, unpacking the implied models in public discourse, and challenging the prestige of complexity for its own sake. Simplicity in speech, when combined with sincerity and openness to correction, becomes a radical act. Language locks us into patterns of sense-making that often exclude nuance. But by learning to treat speech not as a window but as a model—a flexible, revisable map—we begin to unlearn the blind spots built into every ideology, slogan, or disciplinary dogma. Education becomes not the transmission of content but the transformation of habits: training speakers to recognise when a word has calcified into a cliché, when a concept masks more than it reveals, when confidence has outpaced comprehension. This linguistic awareness is the cornerstone of real intelligence. It is not an elitist property but a democratic skill, teachable and necessary. It demands that public institutions shift from reward systems based on performance to those based on reflection. That universities reward the questioner as much as the expert. Until intelligence is defined not merely by IQ or credentials, but by one's relationship to language—its flexibility, humility, and ethical use—stupidity will continue to dominate decision-making. The world will be ruled not by the ignorant, but by the overconfident. And systems will be governed not by insight, but by inertia. In the end, the boundary between intelligence and stupidity is not fixed. It is drawn and redrawn in speech. It lives in how people frame problems, accept or reject contradiction, and choose between repeating formulas or facing uncertainty. Intelligence is the art of knowing one might be wrong. Stupidity is the habit of speaking as though one never is.

The Value of Stupidity

The idea that 'feeling stupid' might be an advantage in scientific research took root in 2008, when Martin A. Schwartz, a professor of microbiology and biomedical engineering at the

University of Virginia, published a brief yet resonant essay[98] 'The importance of stupidity in scientific research'. In it, Schwartz contended that facing one's ignorance is not just a side effect of research—it is the very condition for meaningful discovery. His insights came after a conversation with a former classmate who had left her Ph.D. program, not because she lacked intelligence, but because the daily experience of feeling lost eroded her confidence. Schwartz, initially surprised, soon realised that he too regularly felt 'stupid' in his work. Rather than resisting this discomfort, he began to interpret it as a marker of true inquiry. 'Productive stupidity', in Schwartz's view, means deliberately pursuing questions whose answers lie beyond current understanding. This conscious entry into the unknown, where failures are frequent and outcomes uncertain, is what drives genuine innovation. Unlike classroom success, which rewards accuracy and recall, research demands resilience in the face of confusion and error. Schwartz proposed that graduate education must help future scientists become comfortable with this shift—from mastering known material to confronting what no one yet understands. Encouraging this intellectual humility could reorient the culture of science around exploration rather than achievement. This insight transcends the laboratory. In every discipline, the real work begins where knowledge ends. Einstein himself emphasised the importance of posing questions more than finding answers. Cultivating environments that welcome uncertainty and foster curiosity over certainty is a prerequisite for progress. In this light, the feeling of stupidity is not a failure but the engine of creativity. The refusal to ask tough questions, to challenge what is accepted, is the only true stupidity.

James F. Welles, in his 1987 book 'Understanding Stupidity', approached the subject from a broader theoretical perspective. His work proposes that stupidity is not simply a product of individual failure but is embedded within behaviour, biology, and culture. Drawing from behaviourism, Welles pointed out that human actions are constrained by learning patterns and prior causes. In this view, stupidity is not a moral lapse, but an organic failure that arises when cognitive and environmental limitations intersect. Yet beyond biology, cultural systems often reinforce what Welles called the 'neurotic paradox'. This is a feedback loop wherein collective norms amplify maladaptive behaviours to the point of dysfunction. Group loyalty, language conventions, and pressure to conform can push behaviour far from what would serve individual or group survival. In such contexts, actions become 'stupid' not merely because they fail, but because they undermine the very standards and values the group claims to uphold. Welles defined stupidity as behaviour that betrays the expectations of one's own reference group—whether by distorting perception, abandoning social balance, or justifying actions through delusion. Stupidity is not every mistake; it is the kind of mistake that repeats itself through self-deception and denial, long after its cost becomes evident. This kind of stupidity is sustained not by ignorance alone, but by power, justification, and institutional inertia. Even as the world accumulates knowledge at an unprecedented rate, it does not follow that wisdom increases proportionally. Our systems, Welles warned, teach how to act but not how to reflect on those actions. Education imparts skills without critical self-awareness. Science produces data without addressing fundamental moral failures. In this sense, stupidity is not just a failure to know—it is a failure to rethink.

A deeper awareness of stupidity's structures thus creates a moral imperative. If stupidity results from systemic loops and cultural blindness, then understanding these mechanisms

[98] Schwartz, M.A. (2008). The importance of stupidity in scientific research. Journal of Cell Science, 121(11), pp.1771–1771. doi:https://doi.org/10.1242/jcs.033340.

obligates individuals and institutions to intervene. The past is full of errors that could have been avoided; studying them is a way of minimising future harm. A society that learns only how to accumulate knowledge, without learning how to use it, risks repeating its worst mistakes. This call to reason must include reflection on how science itself enacts and perpetuates stupidity. Stupidity, after all, is not simply ignorance but false certainty. It is not the absence of facts but the inability to use them wisely. A system that praises speed over depth, formatting over originality, or prestige over truth invites institutional stupidity. When language becomes a shield rather than a window, and jargon replaces clarity, scientific discourse fails its purpose. So, who studies stupidity? The field spans disciplines. Psychologists investigate cognitive biases and misjudgements. Sociologists look at the group dynamics that foster collective error. Linguists examine how meaning gets distorted by euphemism, repetition, and overcomplication. In recent decades, interdisciplinary fields like behavioural economics and the science of science (SciSci) have begun mapping how intelligent people and systems still make irrational, even catastrophic, decisions. Language plays a significant role. On the surface, studying stupidity through language analysis may seem contradictory. But language is the primary mechanism through which humans misunderstand and mislead. Scholars of discourse and pragmatics reveal how linguistic conventions can create and obscure meaning. Samuel Beckett once referred to 'stale words' that bury the truth. The critique of 'word-superstition'—belief in the authority of meaningless phrases—is a way of diagnosing initial stages of collective delusion. Studying linguistic stupidity is therefore not itself absurd, but essential for understanding how error spreads.

The psychology of group behaviour adds another layer. Irving Janis's model of groupthink demonstrates how tightly-knit groups suppress dissent, prioritise unanimity, and stumble into disastrous decisions—from political miscalculations to scientific frauds. Deindividuation research shows how people in large collectives lose personal restraint and act in ways they never would alone. The stupidity here is not individual, but systemic—a failure rooted in context, communication, and pressure to conform. This failure extends to how language functions as a tool of control. Originally, language evolved to bind people together in shared purpose. It was the glue of community and cooperation. But in mass societies, it is often used to deceive, rally, and manipulate. Political slogans, marketing campaigns, and social media echo chambers compress complex ideas into catchphrases designed to trigger obedience, not thought. What once enabled communion now enables conformity. As such, stupidity in language is not a passive accident—it is a design feature of mass manipulation. No single discipline can exhaustively explain stupidity. Linguistic analysis shows how words decay. Psychology reveals how judgment collapses. Neuroscience identifies how the brain's architecture can mislead itself. These approaches together provide tools for counteracting stupidity—teaching media literacy, designing deliberative systems that preserve dissent, and fostering environments where ignorance can be acknowledged rather than hidden. The study of stupidity is not cynical. It is, in fact, a hopeful enterprise. By tracing the steps that lead to bad decisions, we can prevent repetition. By recognising the limits of our intelligence, we can structure institutions more wisely. The effort may seem paradoxical—using intelligence to study stupidity—but it is this recursive self-awareness that constitutes wisdom.

The pursuit of this wisdom requires a commitment to meta-reflection. A science that examines how science fails. An education that includes not just facts but the limits of knowing. A political culture that values dissent. A linguistic style that prefers clarity over performance. Above all, it demands the courage to admit what we do not know and to treat that admission not as a flaw, but as a foundation. The embrace of productive stupidity is therefore not a resignation, but a challenge. It asks for humility, patience, and critical imagination. In research,

it encourages stepping into the void without guarantees. In society, it calls for systems that reward questions, not just answers. In language, it urges simplicity without reducing complexity. And in ourselves, it demands that we tolerate uncertainty without giving up the pursuit of truth. Stupidity is not a failure of intellect but a failure of humility—a refusal to engage uncertainty honestly. Science, education, and culture have all, at times, repeated the very errors they were built to transcend, accumulating meaningless stories and sterile jargon in place of understanding. Like religions before it, science risks becoming a faith in process over purpose. Its salvation lies not in more data, but in more doubt. By institutionalising the value of productive stupidity—admitting ignorance, resisting conformity, and honouring curiosity—we renew the spirit of inquiry and open the way to wisdom.

Stupidity in Science

Emilio Gómez-Milan's essay[99] 'Stupidity in Science' highlights how it operates not only in individuals but as a structural condition within science itself. Institutions and cultures can display what might be called *automatic stupidity*: scientific systems that ignore their own ignorance and lack the critical self-reflection essential for genuine advancement. To correct this, science needs sustained meta-analysis (a 'science of science'), slow-science practices, revamped peer review systems, nuanced statistics for varied individuals, ethical resistance to 'neuromania', and transparent public communication. Above all, science must return to curiosity-driven research, intrinsic motivation, and an authentic love of knowledge. Science today resembles a conveyor belt of fragmented papers rather than the 'consciousness of the world' it could become. The traditional boundaries between mind and matter, data and metaphor, have collapsed—but the discipline has divided its focus so finely that it often loses sight of method and meaning. Both macro theories and micro data are necessary, and this calls for reclaiming meta-science—not just philosophy but empirical study of scientific practice. Science promotes authority and rejection: over 90 percent of papers are rejected by peer review. Yet authority is claimed confidently in fields like consciousness or cosmology while ignorance remains effectively limitless. Humility should be the bedrock of science; instead, arrogance is common. Successful science should generate questions first, papers second, and cultivate systems that favour innovation over conformity. Peer review often masks itself as mind-reading rather than critical evaluation. Reviewers demand high output and citations, while measures of creativity and merit remain crude. Intelligence in science should mean analysing the system itself—peer review, funding flows, publication pressures—based on evidence rather than tradition.

Scientific truth is provisional. Controlled trials and lab models are managed contexts; real life is messy. Vaccines save lives, but not all laboratory insights translate into the world. Acknowledging uncertainty, resisting scientism, and recognising the interpretive role of humanity are essential. Science operates under tension between speed and depth. Darwin's evolutionary theories evolved through slow reflection, but today's publish-or-perish culture rewards rapid output. Restoring depth is urgent. Peer review thrives on rejection and breeds envy. Reviewers often uphold formatting and literature-checking over novel ideas. A better system would combine permissiveness with critical rigor—but only if it also undergoes transparent self-assessment. Grant allocation should shift from meeting CV milestones to

[99] Gómez-Milan, E. (2021). Stupidity in Science. Stupidity in Science. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348976931_Stupidity_in_Science.

judging ideas on their own merits. Publicly available proposals and open review could democratise funding, breaking cycles where prior prestige predicts future success. Group-level statistics dominate science, but application to individuals requires understanding distribution and variance. Clinical or practical significance cannot be reduced to p-values. Frameworks that link group results to individual cases are vital. Citation counts drive conformity and discourage novelty. Their prominence undermines intrinsic motivation and intellectual risk-taking. Exploring alternative quality metrics, or reducing reliance on citations, may infuse more courage into discovery. Endless guidelines—on ethics, formatting, reporting—create compliance rather than creativity. While safeguards matter, bureaucratic excesses can suffocate intellectual freedom. The challenge lies in distinguishing regulation that protects from that which merely enforces uniformity. Behind metrics and gatekeeping is a simple failure: science has lost sight of curiosity. Rebels—those who challenge norms—are needed now more than ever, along with a reclamation of science as a human, humble, intrinsically motivated activity. Science must rediscover its humility. Valuing slow, creative inquiry alongside rapid publication, subjecting its own practices to scrutiny, and acknowledging deep ignorance can break the cycles of institutional stupidity and restore the promise of a discipline grounded in wonder.

In 'The importance of stupidity in scientific research' Martin A. Schwartz emphasises the value of personal confrontation with stupidity. His anecdote about a friend quitting a PhD program because her research made her feel stupid reveals the difference between schooling and scientific inquiry. Success in science means framing novel questions, designing experiments for unknowns, and navigating failure. When Nobel laureate Henry Taube admitted ignorance, he modelled a healthier form of intelligence—embracing productive stupidity to ignite discovery. Acknowledging boundless ignorance can be liberating. Research is hard. No policy or institutional reform can trivialise that fact. Graduate programs rarely teach gratitude for stupidity. Instead, oral exams could reward admissions of ignorance, showing readiness for genuine inquiry. Productive stupidity is deliberate—embracing uncertainty while venturing into the unknown. Each failure, when learnt from, moves understanding forward. Discomfort with not knowing becomes the gateway to deeper insight. Science demands that feeling of stupidity not be feared but fostered. Progress comes from asking unanswerable questions, persisting amid setbacks, and valuing failure's lessons. Linguistically, stupidity and intelligence manifest in the speeches of scientists and how institutions structure discourse. Language shapes thought, institutions, and research habits. Stupidity in science often emerges as certainty divorced from nuance, clarity replaced by jargon, and rules that inhibit imagination. Academic language can become performative: buzzwords, branding, and jargon turn science into corporate messaging rather than inquiry. The result is 'functional stupidity', where questioning and complexity are suppressed in the name of consensus or strategy.

Stupidity’s worst offenses occur when rules and indicators mask incompetence. Following protocols blindly—ethics checklists, logos of certification—without thinking, can produce harm. The media frenzy around issues like mental health or genetic breakthroughs often reveals a faith in authority rather than evidence. The study of stupidity—'stupidology', is urgently needed. Stupidity is not a gap in knowledge but an overconfidence in rules and systems where more data worsens decision-making. Intelligence, instead, favours adaptability, simplicity, and context. Stupidity in science thrives in extremes: politically motivated scholarship, over-reliance on convenience sampling, or fashionable but shallow theory. Dunning–Kruger effects are common even among the well-educated: extreme opinions on biotech or AI often correlate with shallow understanding and misplaced confidence. Rejecting complexity for complexity’s sake, or hiding behind obscure math and overstated conclusions,

are linguistic signs of scientific failure, not subtlety. The humanities offer a corrective. Dramatic works about scientific hubris—whether Hawking forsaking doubt or Eichmann performing evil under bureaucratic framing—show how language structures moral and epistemic failure. Historical sociology, narrative, philosophy—all illuminate the conditions under which stupidity takes hold.

Science needs reflection on its own discourse. Words form the boundaries of what can be thought, questioned, or imagined. When language becomes rigid—equations, acronyms, technical terms that function as code—it obstructs rather than enables knowledge. The final turn toward humility lies in reclaiming language. Simpler discourse, open uncertainty, frank admissions of ignorance—these are not rhetorical devices but vital instruments of real intelligence. Resetting language can dismantle systemic stupidity. Science aspires to insight, but it can degenerate through institutionalised error. Science aspires to discovery, but it can be reduced to conformity. Yet nothing in the essence of scientific method demands that failure. By confronting stupidity, reviving wonder, and making humility structural rather than rhetorical, the discipline can fulfill its promise. In the end, stupidity in science is an institutional phenomenon as much as a personal one—rooted in how language governs norms, grants authority, and suppresses uncertainty. The ambition to remedy it lies not in slogans or metrics but in transforming discourse: rewarding questions, valuing failure, embracing ignorance, and admitting, with humility, what remains unknown. Stupidity in science is a failure of collective imagination. Intelligence will follow when systems honour inquiry over output, depth over speed, and curiosity over convention.

Science must learn humility in facing its own stupidity. Like the dogmas of past religions and knowledge systems, it risks producing massive volumes of data, jargon, and theory that collapse. Without self-criticism, it repeats old errors—replacing sacred texts with peer-reviewed emptiness. As science evolves into a new secular faith, it must accept its fate: not as the master of truth, but as a flawed yet hopeful language of seeking, not knowing.

Profound indoctrination

'It's indoctrination so profound that educated people can't even understand the question that I just raised. Try it with journalists. Ask them: can there be journalism on the Iraq war that can be something different from the college newspaper cheering for the home team'.

- Noam Chomsky, (No One's Listening, December 7, 2005)

Noam Chomsky's remark during his 2005 interview with Irene—'Education can make you more thoroughly indoctrinated'—cuts to the core of a hidden danger within schooling. It suggests that advanced study does not guarantee intellectual freedom; on the contrary, it often reinforces unspoken limits on thought, shaping the consciousness of individuals so deeply that they take the dominant narrative as neutral fact. This indoctrination is not imposed by decree but is woven into the fabric of education, media, and institutional culture, making it both profound and invisible. Chomsky's claim—that even well-informed journalists may be incapable of questioning core assumptions—emerges in critique of every war coverage since. When the challenges is to break from 'cheering for the home team', it reveals how narrow public opinion becomes once the boundaries of acceptable discourse are internalised. In this dynamic, entire professions become echo chambers, repeating received truths under the illusion of objectivity. In the mid-nineteenth century, newspapers in England and the U.S. were remarkably open and diverse. As ownership centralised and advertising replaced reader revenue, news became shaped by profit, not public service. Editors carved a 'news hole' only

after selling ad space; TV networks financed content through commercials, and PR firms began to produce news-ready video segments disguised as independent journalism. The effect: manufactured consent under the veneer of choice. This model persists today. Modern political campaigns borrow heavily from consumer advertising. They spotlight image over substance—optics over policy—and emotional resonance over intellectual clarity. As a result, surveys consistently show that only a tiny fraction of voters can articulate candidates' real positions. Media now feels like a masquerade—complete with rehearsed gestures and scripted lines—where education becomes a tool to internalise this hollow spectacle.

Not surprisingly, the most indoctrinated groups are often the best educated. They genuinely believe they are objective, unaware of the assumptions they carry. This because of hidden taboos embedded in elite education—phrases that cannot be uttered, ideas that cannot be questioned, debates that must be avoided. The original introduction to 'Animal Farm', where Orwell criticised British elites, was suppressed to avoid offending the same class. That omission exemplifies how admission of worldview assumptions is considered too dangerous. Scholars trained to think critically outside these boundaries risk professional ostracism. Indoctrination becomes second nature once those boundaries are internalised. Gatekeepers—editors, academic panels, professional bodies—act as implicit censors. Dissent is quietly discouraged. The result: a seamless continuity between corporate narrators and institutional voices. Even advocates for the marginalised become captive to the basic framework—the terms of discourse shift, but not the foundational assumptions. Such systemic indoctrination leaves room for genuine public sentiment to exist unreported. Citizens could favour more social spending, environmental protection, and equitable distribution—but those views may go unacknowledged by mainstream media. A latent majority exists, yet remains disenfranchised, unheard, and out of the linguistic frame. The remedy lies in reviving authentic press not beholden to commercial interests. Public or subscription funding, agents of accountability, and editorial courage can restore a genuinely open marketplace of ideas. The Internet promises to break this cycle—citizen journalism, peer-to-peer sharing, unfiltered eyewitness accounts, and grassroots data have already reshaped how information flows. Corporations and governments attempt to co-opt digital platforms, yet their openness still allows alternative narratives to surface, and ripe spaces of political energy to emerge.

At the heart of Chomsky's critique lies the paradox: knowledge systems built to empower can instead narrow imagination. Elites emerge confident, objective, even righteous—yet harbour conceptual blinders preventing them from questioning the premises of state and corporate power. Journalism and scholarship become ministries of legitimation rather than engines of critique. Indoctrination, then, is not limited to formal schooling—it extends through informal channels: public relations, think tanks, social norms, and subtle biases within professional cultures. From catechism schools to what passes for higher learning today, teaching becomes less about awakening minds and more about conditioning acceptance. This applies beyond politics. Religious indoctrination operates similarly: elevation of sacred texts as unquestioned truth, rites rehearsed until they obscure moral agency, taboos enforced by group loyalty. Secular ideologies function in the same way: whether nationalist, technocratic, or bureaucratic, they cultivate intellectual habits anchored in assumptions never examined. False neutrality thrives at the top. If only 10 percent of voters understand policy beyond sound bites, the rest remain spectators—passive consumers of image-based persuasion. Media's sedative effect dulls critical engagement, and education seldom fixes it. Paradoxically, higher education often equips people to rationalise—even celebrate—deeper ignorance. Undermining this requires both intellectual literacy and collective renewal. Digital networks make possible distributed critique through blogs, podcasts, alternatives to mainstream outlets. But digital

infrastructure also requires organising—political associations, unions, civic networks—to translate awareness into power. Individuals must connect their discontent to democratic structures. A free press demands structural separation from commercial and state interests. Journalists must be protected from domination—through independent funding, legal corporation rules, nonprofit models. Investigative reporting should be valued not for clicks but for accountability. Citizens must demand curiosity rather than edited partisan spectacle.

Even if education reforms promise critical thinking and debate, they cannot dismantle the deeper structure of indoctrination, because the very language used to teach and report reality is already saturated with ideological bias. Attempts to shift pedagogy—toward curiosity, discussion, or epistemic humility—still operate within a medium that frames meaning through pre-loaded terms, binary choices, and ritualised expressions. The propaganda model of media does not simply distort content; it thrives on a form of language that renders dissent unintelligible or absurd before it even begins. Generative thinking, critical pedagogy, and safe spaces may appear to offer resistance, but they often reproduce the same linguistic habits: slogans replacing reflection, permissible critique replacing radical doubt, and reformist vocabularies obscuring foundational contradictions. Even the rhetoric of reform depends on institutionalised phrases, borrowed from bureaucratic or corporate templates. In this context, educated individuals do not escape indoctrination—they refine it, learning to speak fluently within the boundaries of what can be said. The more eloquent they become, the more deeply they embed the illusion of objectivity. This is not a rejection of intellectual life but a recognition that intellectualism itself is shaped by linguistic framing. Even access to documents, funding trails, or internal memos cannot guarantee transparency if the very act of interpretation remains imprisoned in the dominant discourse. Civic engagement, watchdogs, and grassroots journalism may slow the machinery, but the machinery still speaks in the grammar of control.

Indoctrination is not enforced from above but enacted through language itself. Doctrines become habits of thought, ideologies become sentence structure, and what cannot be said disappears from possibility. Reform becomes performance, and education a system of fluent compliance. Awareness of this cycle is not liberation—but it is a beginning. When individuals question not only what is taught but how it is spoken—when they distrust even the terms of their own critique—they begin to tear open the veil. In a society built on manufactured truths, the only real education is linguistic rebellion. Not against knowledge, but against the form that knowledge takes when shaped by power. The goal is not to tell better stories within the existing grammar, but to rupture the grammar itself—to speak where silence is imposed, to listen for what dominant language conceals, and to doubt the clarity of every fluent answer. Profound indoctrination is not an accident but the goal of education. Every education system, however modern or secular, relies on repetition—of slogans, formulas, and pre-approved truths—echoed like mantras, memorised like scripture. Whether in classrooms or newsrooms, words become tools of reflex, not reflection—delivered like punches in a boxing match, automatic and unexamined. Language drills obedience into thought, making conformity feel like understanding. In this cycle, true thinking begins only when language is disrupted—when the chant is broken and the mind, briefly, forgets the next line.

Pathology of institutions

Alan G. Gross[100], examining Habermas's critique of 'Systematically Distorted Communication', highlights how institutions warp shared discourse into closed, rationalised

[100] Gross, A.G. (2010). Systematically Distorted Communication: An Impediment to Social and Political Change. Informal Logic, 30(4). doi:https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v30i4.1188.

systems that push individuals toward conformity rather than genuine dialogue. Jürgen Habermas warns that 'The same configurations that drive the individual to neurosis, move society to establish institutions'. These dense institutional configurations—legal systems, healthcare administrations, universities, corporate behemoths—dominate individual thought and soften the boundaries between reason and madness by weaponising specialised jargon and scripted discourse. Every institution today functions as a linguistic ecosystem twisted into pathology—its own language evolving into a force of indoctrination, collective neurosis, and systemic stupidity. The institutionalised linguistic structure works as a shared form of madness—where each administration or power bloc crafts its own jargon and enforces the ruling ideas of its dominant class. Words themselves become instruments of control, demanding ever-tighter guidance to ensure they serve institutional ends rather than human understanding. Social and political institutions become pathological when they mimic the compulsive rigidity found in neurotic behaviour—mechanically repeating actions without regard for actual needs or conditions. Just as a neurotic individual acts out patterns disconnected from reality, an economy may produce goods endlessly, indifferent to whether people want or can afford them. These institutional behaviours reflect entrenched belief systems that mirror psychological disorders, but on a collective scale. Unlike individual distortions, the communication these institutions generate is systematically distorted and widely shared across entire social groups or even whole societies. In their quest for authority, institutions craft hermetic vocabularies: policy wonks defend the indefensible with bureaucratic elocution; legalese styles every act into an impersonal ritual; marketing spin recasts facts into marketable narratives. These are not innocuous technical tools; they are 'shared madness', designed to freeze debate, compress nuance, and embed control. Once this lexicon spreads through every document—emails, memos, strategic plans—it accumulates power. Each new digression enshrines the prior, and soon no one speaks simply. Even dissent becomes a version of jargon.

Let us consider linguistic communication in medicine. In an ideal, humane clinic, the doctor engages the patient in listening and reflection. Words arrive with empathy, open to nuance, and genuine inquiry. In institutional medicine, by contrast, the doctor merely prescribes, reducing communication into empty protocol. Dialogue is silenced under forms and checklists; the patient becomes a case number. Defined by insistent institutional language, the 'doctor' enforces order and obedience, not health. Patients learn to echo prefabricated terms—symptoms, risk factors, compliance—rather than express lived experience. This dynamic scales up across society. In ancient Greece, there were two distinct types of doctors: one for free citizens and one for slaves. The physician treating free citizens was expected to explain the diagnosis and proposed treatment, gaining the patient’s understanding, cooperation, and consent. In contrast, the doctor for slaves provided care without any explanation, acting directly and unquestioningly—treating the patient more like an animal than a human, with no dialogue, just commands and procedures imposed from above. In a world of voluntary 'slavery', institutions foist preaching, directives, and slogans that train behaviour at scale. Doctrines recede into obedience. Individuals become cogs. Consent is no longer symphonic but tasked and tracked. Genuine agreement is impossible in sterile hallways littered with memos and keywords. By contrast, the truth-teller stands in revolt against institutional pathology. Their authority is not derived from official sanction but from conviction. To sway hearts and minds, the truth-teller accepts suffering, channels emotion, and enacts authenticity—not by parroting

slogans but by speaking with integrity and risking consequences. This space of open discourse rejects safe language. All means are permitted—argument, metaphor, even poetry—but never structural evasion or sloganistic hypocrisy. Institutions ossify when they recycle their own language into gospel. The rules become rituals, the rituals become rites, and the rites become dogma. 'Patient-centred care' becomes a phrase nobody questions. 'Evidence-based' becomes shorthand for pre-approved conclusions. 'Safety culture' replicates itself. In such systems, even dissent within becomes a form of pathology—the dissenting voice must use the same coded language or risk expulsion. The crisis intensifies when institutional language becomes a fortress, where words are guarded and only the initiated are granted access. A label must be used precisely as intended—not discovered, not questioned. Pedagogy becomes indoctrination. Public discourse becomes paralyzed. In universities, education reforms—bringing in critical pedagogy, debate, and epistemic humility—are sabotaged by institutional habit: writing centres recast critique as alignment with mission statements; faculty meetings become echo chambers of mission jargon. The instruments of transformation are dulled by language that traps itself.

The mass media system exemplifies this pathology. In Orwell's suppressed introduction to 'Animal Farm', he describes how corporate press owners, fearful of offending powerful interests, preemptively suppress dissent—not by law, but through unspoken consensus. That voluntary censorship is invisible, yet far more potent than any decree. The language of news—sound bites, headlines, lead paragraphs pulled like props—morphs into entertainment and moral signalling, not information. Editorial 'news holes' are carved only around blocks of ads. Viewers, immersed in phrases like 'breaking' or 'exclusive', learn not to ask why, only to react. These institutions—hospitals, schools, courts, media outlets—exhibit shared symptoms: proliferation of platitude; demonisation of nuance; sanctification of jargon; cults of repetition. People within begin to mimic the language reflexively: memos and reports filled with passive voice, empty nouns, and inflated verbs. Staff meetings reward the repetition of management-specified keywords. Strategic plans advertise 'synergy' and 'alignment'. New employees learn the language not to speak, but to survive. Such environments produce neurosis—individuals who feel anxious when left to speak without scripted prompts, who fear being unscripted more than being wrong. Systemic stupidity is a collective phenomenon. Institutions create 'functional stupidity', where clarity is punished and ambiguity rewarded, where trained intelligence is sidelined in favour of linguistic conformity. Hierarchies extract compliance. Productivity is measured in slogan use, not problem-solving. Training becomes indoctrination. Expertise is signalled through layers of specialisation, not genuine understanding. Within this pathology, critical feedback becomes an act of heresy. Those who question the framework are labeled 'difficult' or even attacked as threats to 'organisational culture'. When words are detached from human meaning, institutional discourse becomes life-draining. Meetings replace action. Reports replace care. Key Performance Indicators replace wisdom. Facts are reified into deliverables, and projects become bureaucratic rituals. Transparency collapses as language substitutes for illumination.

If institutions are pathological, how can recovery begin? First, by acknowledging that the language itself is the pathology. It is not enough to reform content; the code must be reheard. Simplify. Encourage plain speech. Replace passive obfuscation with active attribution. Ask not 'how many', but 'why'. Allow silence. Pay attention when jargon becomes a substitute for responsibility. Second, revive the truth-teller. Give space to voices that speak with conviction, not credentials. Allow stories that contain doubt and discomfort. Support journalist-investigators who dig through records, not tweets. Third, resuscitate civil discourse. Habermas's public sphere requires rational-critical debate immune to structured ideological capture. Fourth, decentralise language use. Encourage translation across roles: have

administrators write memos in everyday terms; have front-line workers redefine goals; have students write policy briefs; have patients evaluate guidelines. When multiple voices filter through institutional texts, linguistic rigidity begins to crack. Finally, embrace ongoing institutional critique. Allow institutions to generate unpredictability. Give those metrics weight. Reward failure that reveals structural flaws more than success that conceals them.

When institutions reclaim language as a tool for shared care and curiosity, not scripted control, they can emerge from pathology. Dialogue returns. People feel both heard and thinking. Language becomes human again. Institutions then approach their potential—to serve exploration, not replicating their own illusions. But without confronting the role of institutional language, no reform can last. Policies change, typesets update, but if the words we choose still constrict thought and smother dissent, the pathology remains. Truthfulness becomes optional; scripts resume. Organisational neuroticism returns in new forms. Institutional language demands obedience modelled as coherence, and conformity hidden as consensus. To resist that, the prescription is simple but profound: revive unmediated discourse, let words breathe, insist on authenticity, allow language to fracture, and reform beyond institutional rehearsals. Institutional health depends not on better slogans, but on greater openness. The pathology ends when language is returned—not as an instrument of rule, but as a medium of dialogue.

Chimera of language

'Language is the only chimera whose illusory power is endless, the inexhaustibility which keeps life from being impoverished. Let men learn to serve language'. — Karl Kraus

In his article[101] 'The Chimera of Language? Karl Kraus and Ludwig Wittgenstein', António Sousa Ribeiro explores how Kraus's vision of language shaped not only early twentieth-century discourse criticism but also informed the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. For Kraus, language is not merely a tool to be used but a living entity that must be served. It possesses a power both dangerous and redemptive, a force that can deceive masses through propaganda or awaken the individual through poetic clarity. His lifelong project was to cleanse language from the empty automatism of slogans, from the rot of euphemism, from the collapse of meaning under bureaucratic or journalistic repetition. From the first issue of Die Fackel in 1899, Kraus undertook a meticulous dissection of the language of public life—especially the daily press. He aimed to drain what he called 'the swamp of commonplaces', exposing the erosion of meaning behind the ornate verbosity and empty certitudes of journalism and politics. For him, language was never an innocent instrument but a stage where ethics, truth, and power collided. It was not enough to criticise ideas; one had to examine the language through which those ideas were presented and performed. And the role of the writer was not that of a wordsmith who commands language, but of a servant who listens and responds to its demands with care and humility. This view resonates deeply with Wittgenstein, who would later argue in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus that philosophy consists of clarifying propositions so that their logical form becomes visible. Wittgenstein's famous assertion that 'all philosophy is a critique of language' aligns with Kraus's ethical and stylistic vigilance. For both thinkers, the task of criticism is neither to destroy language nor to claim mastery over it, but to refine it, to make it capable once more of disclosing the world rather than concealing it. Central to Kraus's ethics of language is the concept of fantasy—not fantasy in the sense of escapism or

[101] Ribeiro, A.S. (2013). The Chimera of Language? Karl Kraus and Ludwig Wittgenstein. De Gruyter eBooks, pp.373–388. doi:https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110294699.373.

delusion, but a disciplined imaginative engagement with words. Fantasy is a social and historical force. An ability to use language in a way that awakens new possibilities, that restores to expression a sense of risk and authenticity. It is through fantasy that language escapes cliché and begins to shape reality. Kraus's wartime writings trace the consequences of a press that no longer communicates but manufactures perception. The result is not simply disinformation, but a general anaesthesia—an inability to perceive suffering, injustice, or individuality. Language becomes a system of deflection, where euphemism replaces fact, and ritualised expressions serve to validate violence.

When the Lumière brothers projected 'The Sprinkler Sprinkled' in 1895, audiences were astonished by the simple sight of leaves trembling in real time. This astonishment was not just about motion—it marked the emergence of a new perceptual regime, one in which illusion gained the authority of presence. Within decades, cinema had evolved into a sophisticated system of artifice. The painted reality of 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' gave rise to an aesthetic that blurred the line between seen and imagined. What was created was not a language, but a fantasy world—pseudo-realism in its purest form. This convergence of fiction and fact is not a trivial phenomenon of media but a defining aspect of modern life. Paradoxically the technology of modernity revived magic. As Adorno noted, audiences consent to illusions knowingly. They participate in what might be called a role-entry contract: they suspend their disbelief not out of naivety but from a deeper desire to belong to a shared illusion. Genres provide the framework. Through repetition, trope, and formula, individuals become part of a unified 'we'. They are not misled so much as drawn into consensus by narrative rhythm. Film and media do not merely entertain; they synchronise the emotions of a fragmented public. The deeper concern arises when this synchronisation is no longer voluntary when illusion becomes environment. When democracy itself increasingly depends on staged and scripted communication. Political language adopts the genres of entertainment, and media becomes not merely a channel for information but a tool of governance. Nudges, visual cues, rehearsed performances—these replace deliberation. In this trajectory, media language evolves toward neurochemical compliance to ensure that citizens not only watch but feel the proper way.

This is the chimera of language—its power not to mirror truth but to construct realities so immersive that alternatives vanish. And the illusion is not in the content alone but in the repetition, the genre, the choreography of expression. Public language becomes performance. Journalism, advertising, even education become extensions of a scripted world, where meaning is drained by familiarity. The real threat is not that language lies but that it anesthetises. Euphemism does not falsify—it dulls. Cliché does not misrepresent—it numbs. Language does not need to deceive to be dangerous; it only needs to become automatic. The tragedy is not miscommunication, but desensitisation. Words are spoken, heard, repeated—but no longer felt. The audience is not fooled; it is sedated. This condition cannot be addressed by purification. It calls for confrontation. The act of critique becomes a kind of surgery: isolating infected phrases, exposing ornamental vacuity, and returning to a painful literalness. The language is forced to account for itself—not in terms of logic, but in terms of moral presence. What matters is not whether words are true in a scientific sense, but whether they awaken or conceal, whether they foster awareness or prevent it. Fantasy plays a decisive role here. Not fantasy as delusion, but as disciplined imagination. When cultivated, it allows language to escape automation, to become once again an ethical force. The philosopher and the poet both seek this: a speech that does not collapse into formula but opens space for thought. The task is not to deny meaning, but to preserve its fragility. Public language in times of crisis reveals its chimera most clearly. Bureaucratic speech replaces justice with policy. Wartime rhetoric replaces grief with honour. Euphemism becomes anaesthesia. The audience is not asked to agree, only to submit. The

response must be stylistic as well as philosophical. It must challenge the aesthetic of certainty. Satire becomes not mockery but rescue. By revealing the mechanics of performance, critique breaks the spell of genre.

Language does not merely report; it stages. And so, the ethical burden lies in form. Clarity, silence, rhythm—these are not decorations but decisions. When language recognises its limits, it allows the listener to enter. When it ignores those limits, it becomes violence. The struggle is not for precision alone, but for care—for the reintroduction of difficulty, ambiguity, and responsiveness into the domain of speech. The philosopher's book does not end discourse but redirects it. Propositions become not conclusions but thresholds. Their power is not in asserting truth but in showing the structure of meaning. They do not describe the world; they allow it to appear. In this light, even the most rigorous texts are literary. Their value lies not in their claims but in their resonance, in the ways they shift attention. Language does not belong to science. It belongs to the humanities because it is not reducible to data. It is a site of relation, not calculation. It moves through echo and gesture, through contradiction and repetition. Its power is not to contain reality but to offer access to it. The chimera of language is not an error to be corrected but a condition to be embraced. Its illusions are not always deceits; they can be revelations. But only if they are not allowed to become habitual. When illusion becomes structure, when speech hardens into slogan, critique becomes our only tool of recovery. Serving language means surrendering mastery. It means becoming its caretaker, not its owner. The critic listens for what resists saying. The writer attends to what trembles beneath the sentence. Language must be handled as one handles fire—capable of warmth or destruction, never inert. Its chimera is both danger and gift. When you learn to serve it, do not banish illusion; just learn how to live truthfully among its shadows.

Unverifiable words

Words cannot be proved or confirmed finally; they evade verification, remaining forever open to dispute, refutation, or outright fabrication. They exist equally in myth, allegory, and cliché as in invention and fancy. Though every utterance may feel weighty, its claim often slips away under scrutiny, leaving only the echo of our imagination. Think of the ancient babble from which the very idea of language emerged—a babble-tower built from idle chatter. The Latin 'babulus' and Greek 'barbaros' labeled speakers whose tongues were not understood as mere mockery; they were outsiders. Yet even in that confusion, the drive was clear: to claim identity by stamp, accent, accentuation. Words became markers—flags planted in thought. But whose lineage did the seed of meaning belong to? Biblical typology warns that every slogan, every worn-out phrase, so often locks us into a prescribed role: a porn cliché, a punk protest, a parody done so often it ceases to parody. Why speak at all? What use does every message have beyond feeding the habits of its audience—and the speaker's own inertia? A brand of 'scientific babble' parades as expertise while students nod politely—too afraid to admit confusion—and power slips into untested tongues. Words get their energy from the act of speaking, not from truth. Their authority arises not from verification, but from repetition and reinforcement by those too invested to question. Yet perhaps the collapse of dominant meaning is also its liberation. The story of Babel—where tongues fractured global power—reveals that no single language can rule all. In that rupture lies the potential to dismantle monolithic speech and embrace the unverifiable in each voice. The failure of shared vocabulary is not tragedy but possibility: a chance for each word to emerge unclaimed, unpinned to any ultimate authority. In that silence between syllables, genuine meaning breathes.

When no single origin unilaterally dominates a text, authorial intent loses authority. What remains is an open exchange between words and interpretive communities. Each reader becomes a co-author, responsible for assigning meaning. Stanley Fish called these interpretive communities—groups whose shared assumptions make certain readings possible and others unthinkable. Without such communities, no passage yields a stable sense. It follows that truth and beauty arise only in collective negotiation; there is no objective canon, only ever-shifting coalitions of interpretation. Eloquence depends as much on audience as speaker. Words can persuade, but they can also evade or flatter through coquettish circumlocution, hypocrisy, magniloquence, even soliloquy—which performs not for others but for the self. Every speech act depends on its recipient. In an age of pressure towards conformity, people cling to regional idioms, subculture slang, niche jargons—not only to mark identity but to sustain it. Those idioms are doubly personal and social, always shaped by historically wider circles of discourse. Paul Ricoeur's 'masters of suspicion'—Marx, Freud, Nietzsche—taught that surface meanings conceal deeper economic, psychological, and existential forces. Ferdinand de Saussure can be seen as a fourth 'master of suspicion' for revealing the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs and distinguishing between 'langue' (the language system) and 'parole' (individual speech). His view challenged the idea of language as a transparent mirror of reality or direct conduit of thought. To see a slogan is not simply to hear a phrase, but to glimpse power, desire, or repression beneath it. Reading becomes an act of excavation, a journey from complacent acceptance to critical distance.

Karl Kraus described aphorisms living between half-truth and 'one-and-a-half truths', neither full nor empty—paradoxes unresolved. He understood language as both mother and laboured child of thought, cracked open by repeated critique. Kraus trusted neither cliché nor collaborator; he demanded that every sentence be actively wrestled with. He believed education fails when it is received, not transformed. He believed safe opinions house nothing of value; only turbulent ideas matter. To savour a text, Kraus said, criticism must be turned into labour. That is to say: a genuine encounter with language is work; it is conditional, incomplete, and unafraid of contradiction. So, what becomes of public meaning when institutional or media-language turns mechanical? Slogans become proxies for thought. Perfunctory statements take the place of substance. Habits ossify into default speech, and yet authority remains. Through this dynamic public perceptions are shaped—not by argument but by atmosphere, not by logic but by refrains looped until they numb. Meaning shrinks as rhetoric, style, and affect swell. Now, with mass media and digital platforms, this process accelerates. Cinema and television do more than present—they stage. Viewers are complicit in the 'role-entry agreement': they accept falsehood yet repeat it, merging fiction into fact. Genre conventions replicate expectations. Politics becomes theatre. Emotional tone replaces argument. The boundary between experience and simulation vanishes; language no longer describes but stages. What began as communication becomes choreography of compliance. Ironically, empathy can be corroded by oversaturation of media itself. Euphemism hides suffering, ornament cloaks emptiness, polished speech numbs awareness. Words continue—but meaning departs. The danger is not that people are misled, but that they stop listening to their own capacity to hear. Public life stales: discourse becomes a mechanical echo. In such moments, speech occurs—but no one is present. A ghost of meaning lingers, felt but empty.

The cure? Not more purity, but more vigilance, clarity, care. One form of critique is to render inflated speech into literal form, not to mock, but to reveal. Take the florid political statement: strip its metaphors, expose its lack of coherence. Underneath what seemed profound is often mere circularity. Pretended moral urgency collapses into mechanical phrasing. What seemed real is ceremony. This matters because public language becomes detached through

repetition. The more a phrase is uttered, the less signifying force it carries—yet hearers still respond. It is through such mechanisms that collective perceptions are shaped. Not by convincing, but by cultural saturation. Not by persuasion, but by presence. It is here that the chimera of language becomes a pathology. Words continue—but meaning fades, replaced by comfort, blind faith, cultivated ignorance. The public sphere turns from discourse into ritual: each statement calms, confirms, numbs. The ethical response is not contemptuous distancing but engaged resistance. Critique must retain precision, not dilution, humility, not cynicism. The critic becomes both surgeon and servant, removing infection yet preserving the voice. Language deserves that reward. Its illusions are not enemies—they are invitations. Deception both exposes and teaches. What misleads, when examined, can instruct. The key is not to escape illusion, but to notice its direction, its limit. When fantasy is reclaimed as discipline—not as escapism but as a practiced awareness of possibility—language reawakens. It regains its capacity to open, wound, catalyse inquiry. In that moment, writer and philosopher share purpose: both preserve an ethical intensity of words. They care less about answers than about asking the right questions. That means embracing uncertainty, liminality. Meaning is never a destination—it is an evolving landscape of interpretation. A statement does not lie at the end of inquiry, but at its edge. The artistic or philosophical echo is not proof, but proof of life: the proof that language still breathes.

Words cannot be finally proven or pinned down. Their meanings shift with context, echo, and audience. Even the most rigid texts—laws, treatises—depend not just on logic but on rhythm, pause, tone. Language is not neutral data; it is performance. Words act they threaten, console, seduce, and obscure. They do not mirror reality—they construct it, distort it, rearrange it. Their force lies not in truth but in relation. Society demands speech to sustain its structures, pressuring individuals to share and engage. But what is being shared? Often, unverifiable words—received slogans, habitual phrases, accepted meanings held together by inertia and community trust. Interpretation does not emerge from the word alone, but from the web of assumptions surrounding it. Meaning is made collectively, not found individually. To speak is not to disclose facts but to perform roles, to participate in rituals of understanding. Silence, therefore, becomes subversive—not an absence, but a refusal to participate in unverifiable speech. True communication lies not in certainty, but in shared attention to the ambiguity of expression. Language must be approached not as fact, but as art. Only then can it reawaken conversation and restore its power to reveal, rather than merely persuade.

Self-consuming artefacts

Stanley Fish[102] shifted the focus of literary theory from author and text to the active role of the reader: meaning does not dwell in fixed words, but in how individuals and groups engage with them. His notion of 'interpretive communities' argues that readers bring shared assumptions, habits, and interpretive strategies, shaping a text even as they believe they are discovering it anew. Within such communities, reading becomes a dynamic exchange between past conventions, current beliefs, and emerging interpretations. Literary works, then, behave like self-devouring machines: they generate the very responses that remake them, always consuming the ground beneath their own stability to conjure new meaning. No text ever stands still. Fish's famous phrase—'self-consuming artefacts'—captures this beautifully. These artefacts yield no stable signification; instead, they collapse and reform under scrutiny,

[102] Fish, Stanley (2000). "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One". Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature: 267–278.

challenging the illusion that any text holds a fixed truth. A pun, a rhetorical twist, a subverted phrase: each playful gesture underscores the fluid choreography of meaning in motion. As Fish observes in 'How to Recognise a Poem When You See One', the distinction between poems and non-poems emerges not from formal criteria but from the interpretive commitments readers make. To witness language deconstructing itself is to recognise that how words mean often outweighs what they mean. Rhetorical questions like 'Is that so?' lose their burden of certainty when they twist and gesture—and open space for reflection. Idioms like 'break the ice' or 'raise the bar' invert under reinterpretation, no longer symbols of social ritual but reflexes of shifting communities. Each phrase carries embedded history and assumption—and no phrase is immune to playful upset. Rhetoric becomes the tool of deconstruction. A pun with 'bark' can deconstruct the stability of tree, dog, and language itself. In the poem 'Mending Wall', Robert Frost said, 'Good fences make good neighbours', but you turn it into 'Good fences make bad migrants', and suddenly the meaning fractures, implicates ideology, and forces us to ask how phrases circulate.

The game must never freeze. No dialectic should ossify into dogma. Fish warns against the myth of the author's authority and the aesthetic hierarchy that crowns certain texts. Instead, meaning is a rule-governed puzzle whose rules shift as interpretive communities shift. We must remain vigilant—language is unstable; meaning is provisional. This vigilance disarms any metaphysical or aesthetic claim embedded in text. A grand poetic image—'the moon was a ghostly galleon'—is beautiful until someone reads it as a colonial metaphor, commandeering the imagination. Ritual praise becomes parody; solemn metre becomes mechanical echo. Every claim of transcendence must be met with a wink: language serves the reader's game, not some silent object of truth. Even academic terminology proves unstable. Words like 'sustainability', or 'climate scepticism' mean different things in different interpretive communities. The phrase itself does not decide; the reader's community does. Speech acts become performative, not declarative. Fish's project asks readers to track the turns of language: how signification loops back upon itself, consuming its ground. Like conceptual art that tears down the frame, each metaphor, each trope, eats its own premise. When language performs 'deconstruction', it reveals itself as an ever-shifting matrix. This holds in academic writing, courtroom speech, political ads: every genre eats itself. A legal code promising impartial justice becomes a tool of power once interpreted by lawyers, judges, and legislators. Technical terms like 'evidence-based' become ritual tokens—repeatable, but no longer interrogable. Each silo reinforces itself through jargon and shared assumptions—until its interpretive community reconstitutes it. The reader-response theory does not claim that 'anything goes'. Rather, he shows that meanings are historically and culturally situated. Our interpretive habits are contingent, but not arbitrary. And yet—there is always the potential for rupture. A critic within the same community can point out how a phrase cages thought: revealing, for instance, that 'pro-life' does not necessarily mean what it says. The meaning reconfigures, cracking open.

No text stands apart from its reader; its meaning is constructed within interpretive communities—groups of readers who share linguistic habits, assumptions, and interpretive strategies. Entering such a community means learning its codes: mastering its idioms, its styles of questioning, its ways of assigning value to words. You do not join by agreement but by fluency—by demonstrating that you can read, write, and respond in the ways the community already understands. What you gain is access to meaning-making power. Legal, educational, and bureaucratic institutions depend on this mastery. Specialised language becomes both gatekeeper and weapon—empowering those fluent in its use while excluding others. In legal discourse, for example, language appears objective but is shaped by strategic use; knowing how to 'speak' its formulas grants legal and political power. Educational systems operate similarly,

rewarding those who absorb and reproduce dominant linguistic forms, thereby reinforcing social stratification. Discursive power extends beyond institutions. As Foucault argued, language constructs what is considered true or normal. Those who set the terms of discourse also shape reality. Interpretive communities regulate these norms, embedding inclusion and marginalisation in their practices. Language becomes a force that crafts identity, aligns thought with power, and disciplines deviation. Mastery means entry into a world where words shape possibility—and where questioning them means risking exile. In this sense, texts and institutions are self-consuming: they feed on the energy of readers and actors who accept their terms, even as they offer the illusion of stable meaning. Only by recognising their provisional nature—and our role in their performance—can we reclaim agency over the realities they produce. Language is a powerful tool for controlling information and shaping public perception. Those who control its use—politicians, media, institutions—can frame events and ideas to set agendas and define what is deemed important. Through propaganda, language manipulates emotions and reinforces ideologies by repetition and persuasion. It also creates social norms by labelling behaviours and identities as acceptable or deviant. Stereotypes and titles shape social hierarchies, reinforcing power structures. In this way, language not only conveys meaning but structures reality, influencing what people believe, how they behave, and who holds influence in society.

Deconstructive play is thus not a taste for nihilism, but an intellectual discipline. It demands we interrogate commonplaces, loosen clichés, and acknowledge the labour by which texts produce sense. A slogan on a ballot, a poetic line, a scientific assertion, a weather forecast—they can be deconstructed, shown to be fragile and provisional, not apodictic. Consider a common phrase: 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'. A simple counterclaim—'absence makes the heart go wandering'—creates a pun that upends the poetic wisdom. The shift enacts the instability built into idiom and points to the reader's role in co-creating meaning. The line becomes a site of interpretive suspense. No interpretive community can claim full neutrality. Each claim to truth is circumscribed by reading protocols shared among its members. A poem does not speak unless a community allows it to speak. A legal code does not apply until enforcers and adjudicators interpret it. And a political slogan evokes consent only within publics willing to deploy it. This recognition demands continuous questioning: not only of texts, but of interpretive norms, of institutional contexts, of the tacit rules governing reading. The game is not to expose hidden meanings under texts—they are already exposed. The game is to expose the rules themselves, and how those rules create and constrain meaning. In this vein, educational reform that treats reading as technique, as exposure to texts' interpretive glitches, fosters intellectual resilience. Students learn not to seek stable meaning, but to play interpretive games with awareness of their own commitments. The concluding thought: the reader's responsibility is radical vigilance. To prevent closure, to stay open to pun, to perform critique, to understand that sounds are flux. Language is not an instrument of fixed knowledge but a game of shifting tokens. We must treat words as unverifiable, open to negotiation, spread before us as artefacts consuming themselves in the act of reading. Thus, 'self-consuming artefacts' are not defects, but invitations. To live with language is to accept instability. Meaning is not delivered—it is played.

Linguistic Entropia

Linguistic entropy measures the uncertainty within language. In information theory, entropy quantifies the unpredictability of a message: the more unpredictable the next word, sound, or phrase, the higher the entropy. Applied to language, this means a highly entropic language system is filled with ambiguity, digressions, and unpredictability. Low entropy

suggests predictability and order—simpler grammatical rules, fewer words, more direct communication. In practice, entropy can be detected in the frequency of word usage. English, for instance, has relatively low entropy. Some words appear far more often than others—'the' or 'is' more frequent than 'hippopotamus' or 'paradox'. As such, one can often guess what word comes next, reducing unpredictability. Conversely, in systems where each word or sound is equally likely, prediction breaks down and entropy increases. Over time, languages change in ways that affect entropy. The dropping of suffixes, the rise of tones, or the use of classifiers alter the structure and predictability of communication. This is not necessarily a linear path toward clarity or complexity—sometimes a simplification in one part of the language increases ambiguity in another. Language does not evolve toward understanding, but toward proliferation: more words, more ways to say the same thing, more divergence, more hierarchy.

This leads to two key propositions. First, the more complex the language, the more intricate the social structure. Vocabulary becomes a tool of distinction. Language transforms into a pyramid—at the top, those who master jargon, euphemisms, irony, and coded rhetoric; below, the rest who nod in confusion or pretend to understand. Language is no longer a bridge but a ladder. Hierarchies thrive on complexity. The academy, the law, the bureaucracy, and the priesthood have always spoken their own dialects. Second, complexity breeds misunderstanding. Not because we lack intelligence, but because language becomes a spectacle of inertia. People repeat phrases and slogans not to express thoughts but to gain social approval. Speaking is no longer for clarity, but for performance. This entropic drift does not clarify meaning; it obscures it. The pretence of communication replaces the act. Complexity becomes camouflage. As language grows denser, society grows more unequal. Technical and bureaucratic idioms become symbols of class. The elite send their children to master these codes in expensive schools, while the rest flounder. If you want to participate in the ruling discourse, you must buy into the linguistic machinery. Otherwise, you fall silent—or invent your own codes.

Fellini's 8½ warned against this proliferation of meaninglessness. 'Why add chaos to chaos?' the writer asks. In a world already drowning in signals, images, and noises, the true mission of the artist is to subtract. To learn silence. Each new utterance, each new book, often adds only confusion. Language collapses not with a bang but through the slow erosion of clarity. We no longer speak to understand or to be understood; we speak to signify that we speak.

Human language, for all its layers and metaphors, has not evolved since Plato. We are still stuck in the same rhetorical patterns, only more bloated. Meanwhile, the only truly universal language today is the precise code of machines—programming languages, digital instructions, and algorithmic commands. These do not tolerate ambiguity. They perform. In contrast, human speech is filled with hedges, ironies, and double meanings. It is a tool for manipulation as much as connection. It serves ideologies, institutions, and empires. The Tower of Babel is not just a myth—it is the reality of every intellectual striving to leave their own 'brick' in the structure. Writers chase immortality by forging updated terms, puns, neologisms, or entire systems of thought. They are not seeking truth. They seek recognition. But in doing so, they contribute to linguistic entropy. Each new phrase stretches the semantic field. Each novel meaning pulls older meanings into irrelevance. Language inflates like a currency losing value. And the result is Babel: a noise of rival tongues, each competing for authority, none offering understanding.

In societies with high linguistic entropy, social contracts fail. Repression becomes necessary—not only political but linguistic repression. Speech codes, official narratives,

censorship, and conformity maintain the illusion of shared meaning. Those who deviate are labelled mad, stupid, or dangerous. Institutions teach only the dominant speech: schools, bureaucracies, media—all train minds to repeat and obey. What remains for the individual? Two paths: silence or stupidity. Not a literal stupidity, but a strategic refusal. One can exit the discourse by playing mad, by feigning ignorance, by refusing to participate in the game of meaning. Stop signalling. Stop explaining. Drop out. Silence, or a parody of speech, becomes resistance. Like a gang slang or a prison dialect, a new language arises outside the dominant code—simple, cryptic, and shared only among the excluded. This is not merely theoretical. Studies estimate that a sizable percentage of U.S. inmates, potentially around 50%, may have dyslexia —they literally cannot decode the dominant educational language. So, they create their own codes, their gangs, their forms of order. Rejected by the linguistic elite, they form new hierarchies from the bottom. Language still organises power—even among those excluded from the official speech.

Meanwhile, a new trend emerges: the ignorant elites. Leaders whose language is shallow, whose slogans are simple, whose authority comes from ignorance, not knowledge. They speak to be liked, not to be understood. The masses, themselves trained in slogan repetition, reward them. It is the revenge of entropy. Language returns to simplicity, not through clarity, but through collapse. As complexity increases, meaning decays. Speech becomes a ritual. It masks thought instead of conveying it. Ready-made phrases stand in for actual ideas. Public discourse becomes theatre—like a chemistry that no longer explores the structure of matter but only seeks usable reactions. We abandon science for alchemy, syntax for superstition. This is not new. Indian music, for example, survives without written notes—it is learnt by memory, by repetition. It works because it does not need abstraction. It produces beauty, not theory. Perhaps our languages should return to this oral simplicity: shared sounds, remembered patterns, a song rather than a book. Because in the end, language is a technology of power. It builds and maintains hierarchies. If a society cannot transmit its power structures across generations—through language—it disintegrates. Walls crumble, borders blur, and only scattered speech remains. The social becomes unsocial. The political becomes linguistic. Every sentence carries a trace of command. Every grammar rule hides a norm. Every 'correct' usage suppresses alternatives. This is discourse: a structure of rules and limits. Language trains us to obey before we understand. And once we obey, understanding is no longer necessary.

So, what do we do in the face of this entropy? Some will build new languages. Some will play stupid. Some will say nothing. Each, in their way, rejects the illusion that language leads to truth. Instead, they see that language is performance—crafted not to reveal, but to survive. And thus, we arrive at a strange reversal. The more we say, the less we know. The more we define, the more we obscure. The more we construct language systems, the more we fall into the noise of Babel. True understanding, if it still exists, lies in silence—or the brief, passing moment of genuine communion that no grammar can explain. Language Entropia reveals a paradox: as language grows more elaborate, it loses its power to communicate. Hierarchies rise, comprehension fades, and speech becomes an inert performance. Linguistic complexity becomes a symbol of status, not understanding. In this entropy, meaning collapses. Silence, stupidity, or parody may be the only honest responses left.

The two theses of 'Linguistic Entropia':

1. Language Complexity and Power Hierarchy – As language becomes more complex, the intensity of social hierarchies increases. This reflects how intricate language supports more stratified and rigid power structures.

2. Language Complexity and Comprehension Decline – With increasing language complexity, general understanding declines. Language use becomes performative and status-driven, where individuals pretend comprehension to maintain social standing.

5. Creating conspiracy

Simple conspiracies

Every interpretative community is, at its core, a conspiracy—not in the sinister sense of hidden agendas or plots, but in the older Latin sense of conspirare, 'to breathe together'. To conspire in this context means to think, speak, and understand together, to participate in a shared rhythm of sense-making. This act of communal interpretation builds the foundations of trust, identity, and collective belonging. Through shared language, people inhabit the same symbolic space. But what begins as a living breath eventually crystallises into doctrine. What was once spontaneous becomes ritualised. The conspiracy hardens into ideology. Over time, these interpretative conspiracies accumulate layers: terminologies, citations, slogans, rules, and formulas. They evolve into elaborate castles of language—doctrinal systems built of dense rhetoric and institutional jargon. These castles promise stability and coherence, but they are structurally fragile. Each explanatory layer demands further interpretation. Every slogan acquires its mythology. Eventually, the core of meaning becomes inseparable from the ornamental shell. Words no longer function as vessels of insight but as tokens of loyalty. Speaking becomes ceremonial. Listening becomes passive. The castle of language collapses—not in a dramatic explosion but in a slow decay of repetition and fatigue. This collapse is often followed by a kind of linguistic waste management. When systems of language become too burdensome, too empty, too performative, communities instinctively respond. Books are discarded. Slogans are mocked. Doctrines are abandoned. People retreat into silence or whisper in reduced, coded speech. Sometimes this purge is literal—public burnings, the abandonment of entire vocabularies, or the death of languages themselves. More often it is symbolic: a quiet refusal to participate in the sanctioned speech of failed institutions. And yet, this purge is not a loss of factual knowledge. Human knowledge—about living, caring, suffering, creating—does not reside in jargon or texts. It is transmitted through presence, gesture, tone, and storytelling. It is experiential. The great irony of the collapse is that in throwing away linguistic systems, people recover something more essential: the ability to speak and listen as persons rather than functions of an ideology.

As elaborate systems fail, new forms of speech rise. What replaces collapsed language castles are simpler conspiracies. These are lean, potent, and resonant communities of speech. They require no manuals, footnotes, or theory. They operate with hashtags, catchphrases, memes, and slogans. Their appeal lies in their simplicity and intensity. They offer meaning through repetition, intimacy through exclusion, and identity through shared secrets. What was once bound by doctrinal agreement is now maintained by emotional resonance and tribal affiliation. But even these simple conspiracies are not immune to decay. The very slogans that initially forged solidarity begin to harden into clichés. They become economic assets—tokens

of brand identity, not truths. What starts as speech becomes a performance of loyalty. People no longer speak to express thought but to confirm group membership. Language begins to shape the speaker more than the speaker shapes language. Once again, communication degenerates into ritual, and solidarity devolves into alienation. This process is accelerated in times of populist disruption. When the language of institutions is exhausted, populism steps in with a more visceral vocabulary: profit, fame, betrayal, victory. Complex political ideas are reduced to binary oppositions. Narratives shrink into phrases like 'they are stealing from you' or 'the elites are lying'. These are not arguments; they are affirmations of moral clarity. The populist speech act is a performance, not a deliberation. It replaces dialogue with declaration. In this environment, conspiracy becomes performance. The conspiracy group acts out its belief system through echo, repetition, and outrage. Slogans replace debate. Identity replaces persuasion. Emotional recognition becomes the currency of legitimacy. Winning means being seen, not being understood. Public discourse becomes a spectacle of resonance: noise echoes noise, affirmation follows affirmation, and contradiction is cast out as betrayal.

This is not a failure of information. As the Pew Research Centre's 2017 report, 'The Future of Truth', observed, more data does not lead to better understanding. The opposite occurs: people become overwhelmed, distrust grows, and the signal-to-noise ratio collapses. Information becomes chaos. Miscommunication becomes systemic. And if human nature tends toward misunderstanding, then the cycle of conspiracy, indoctrination, mistrust, and consensus is not a flaw—it is our linguistic inheritance. In this world, every syllable hides a conspiracy. Each word is not only a signifier of meaning but a marker of allegiance. We think we are communicating freely, but our speech is already shaped by the codes, interfaces, and algorithms that mediate it. From the rhetoric of advertising to the cues of social media, our words are framed before we utter them. Language is not a transparent bridge between minds but a constructed path, often engineered to mislead or simplify. Thinkers across traditions have registered this crisis. Mallarmé's poetic silences, Flaubert's ironic detachment, Mauthner's dissection of verbal conventions, Joyce's chaotic inventiveness in Finnegans Wake, Beckett's minimalism, and Cage's silent music all bear witness to the erosion of meaning. Their works sought to dismantle the conspiracy of language by revealing its hidden structures. They practiced irony, silence, absurdity, and disjunction not as aesthetic games but as philosophical strategies for resisting linguistic decay.

In our era, these problems are amplified by technology. Platforms are built to reward repetition and virality. Language is tailored for algorithms, not understanding. The digital environment favours brevity, intensity, and shareability. The result is an ecosystem of mini-conspiracies—each group breathing together, repeating familiar lines, and excluding outsiders. These micro-communities conspire through posts, comments, and likes. They build their own castles of resonance, small but fortified by emotion and identity. Escaping this cycle requires more than rejecting old conspiracies or slogans. It demands a new way of speaking—careful, hesitant, open. It means reclaiming silence as a legitimate response, not a failure. In the logic of conspiracy, silence is ambiguous: it can imply secret knowledge or disloyalty. But silence can also be clarity: a refusal to participate in the noise. Irony, too, becomes a tool of resistance. A simple 'I don't know' or 'I'm not sure' can disrupt the flow of ritual speech. It introduces uncertainty into the script, inviting others to pause and reflect. What the world needs now are new houses of conspiracy—communities of shared speech grounded not in certainty but in inquiry. These conspiracies would not aim for closure but openness. They would breathe

together in question, not in dogma. They would build trust through the unpredictable rhythms of dialogue, not the rigid beats of slogans. Such communities would resist the collapse of language not by defending castles but by cultivating gardens—small, plural, and alive. In such spaces, language would remain provisional. It would be tested constantly, reshaped by context, tempered by listening. These new conspirators would speak with the knowledge that every word can fail. They would avoid speaking too much, choosing instead to dwell in the tension between thought and expression. Their speech would be less about persuading and more about accompanying. They would open doors rather than build walls.

Simple conspiracies remind us that speech begins as a shared breath. It is not the content of doctrine that binds people but the rhythm of conversation, the act of turning toward one another with words that attempt, however imperfectly, to make sense together. The danger arises when that rhythm becomes rigid, when breath becomes chant, when understanding becomes repetition. Then speech loses its life and collapses. And so, the cycle repeats: from the emergence of a shared language community, to its codification, to its institutionalisation, to its commodification, to its collapse, and the birth of a new breath, a new conspiracy. Every time the castle falls, a simpler house is built. Every time words rot, silence returns. And from that silence, a new rhythm begins. By tracing this cycle, we learn not only how language deceives but how it heals. The future does not lie in preserving structures of speech but in renewing its breath. To conspire anew is not to plot in darkness but to speak, to think, and to understand—together.

Conspiracy theory of language

Language is not merely a tool of communication—it is a conspiracy. Every language community is bound by this shared breath, this silent agreement to produce and interpret sound in a mutually intelligible way. The word we use to describe secret plots is also the one that describes what happens every time two people talk. From this perspective, every interpretive community is a conspiracy, held together not by shared facts but by shared rhythms, expectations, codes, and silences. This idea gains depth and nuance through the work of linguist Jeffrey Elman, whose essay 'Origins of Language: A Conspiracy Theory' (1999) reframes the emergence of language not as a singular invention or genetic gift, but as the outcome of a complex, overlapping interplay of cognitive, biological, and environmental systems. Language, Elman argues, is a conspiracy in the sense that it emerges from the synergistic collaboration of components not originally designed to produce it. Elman dismantles the notion of language as an innate, domain-specific faculty hardwired into the brain. Instead, he proposes that language results from general-purpose learning mechanisms constrained by the architecture of the brain and shaped by interaction with richly structured environments. He suggests that small evolutionary adjustments—tweaks in connectivity, shifts in developmental timing—accumulate across distributed networks to yield novel functions like language. These tweaks do not produce a 'language module', but align multiple ancestral capacities in a new and unexpected way. The conspiracy lies in the alignment: various cognitive and neural systems conspire over time to create something that seems to be a single, specialised capacity but is, in fact, an emergent property.

In this biological model, language is a system of converging improvisations. It is not encoded in a single gene, nor is it confined to a specific neural circuit. Rather, it is the result of multiple systems—perceptual, motor, cognitive—collaborating without a leader, like a flock of birds forming a pattern in the sky. This image of emergence also lends itself to a cultural

interpretation. The structures that produce language competence in individuals mirror those that sustain and reproduce language communities. Every group that speaks a language sustains a shared illusion: that what is said is what is meant, that what is meant is what is understood, that understanding is shared. But this illusion rests on trust, and when trust collapses, so does the language. Philosopher Umberto Eco captured this fragility when he remarked in his 2011 conversation with Paul Holdengräber that conspiracies endure because they offer a seductive structure of belief. 'The quickest way to unite a society', Eco observed, 'is to invent a common enemy'. In Eco's world, conspiracy is not a deviation from normal discourse—it is the form that language takes when its foundations of shared meaning are shaken. In The Name of the Rose, the labyrinthine library becomes the site of both knowledge and confusion, and truth is buried beneath layers of delay. Eco warns that the most powerful secrets are often empty, sustained only by the fervour of those who believe in their hidden meaning. Elman's theory of language as an emergent conspiracy finds an uncanny echo in Eco's idea of cultural conspiracy. Both highlight the way systems—biological or social—generate unexpected complexity through interaction. Both also show that this complexity can collapse into paranoia. Every community that 'breathes together' in shared meaning also runs the risk of turning inward, mistaking its own assumptions for truth, and labelling the outside world a threat.

Speaking to different language groups adds a mystical layer to the theory of language as conspiracy. Language becomes a conspiracy between speakers. When you switch from English to Russian, the excluded group is immediately alienated. Language includes and excludes by design. This is not merely a social fact—it can be a metaphysical one. Sound is the foundation of reality. The world is vibration, and language is a refined form of that vibration. A mantra, repeated silently or aloud, is not simply a linguistic token but a resonance that moves through body, mind, and spirit. By refining sound within oneself one can access subtler layers of consciousness, culminating in silence—the ultimate language. Here, conspiracy is both the spoken agreement among a group and the unspoken connection between individual and cosmos. Language becomes a sacred resonance as well as a social code. Modern digital culture, however, reveals the darker sides of linguistic conspiracy. A recent study[103] on 'The Language of Conspiracy' analysed the tweets of prominent conspiracy influencers and their followers. The results show stark linguistic patterns: conspiracy language is dense with anger, fear, certainty, and references to death, power, and exclusion. Followers of conspiracy theories show a heightened use of words that imply group identity, absolute truth, and apocalyptic stakes. By contrast, the language of science communicators emphasises exploration, curiosity, the future, and collective well-being. This division is not merely ideological—it is linguistic. Each group uses language to build and maintain its own conspiratorial community. The conspiracy theorists breathe together in fear and suspicion; the science communicators breathe together in hope and inquiry. Each constructs a world, and each defends it against the other. The conspiracy of language becomes not just a method of bonding but also a strategy of exclusion. What unites within also divides without.

The cycle of language—from trust to indoctrination to suspicion to collapse—is a recurring pattern in human history. As interpretive communities grow, their language becomes more complex, more exclusive, more ritualised. Slogans replace meaning, repetition replaces

[103]Fong, A., Roozenbeek, J., Goldwert, D., Rathje, S. and van der Linden, S. (2021). The language of conspiracy: A psychological analysis of speech used by conspiracy theorists and their followers on Twitter. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 24(4), pp.606–623. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220987596.

understanding, and speech becomes hollow. Eventually, these castles of language collapse, and new conspiracies are born. The simpler the story, the stronger the bond. People once more begin to breathe together, united not by doctrine but by shared disbelief in doctrine. As mistrust of official narratives rises, informal conspiracies gain appeal. They offer a raw, emotional clarity that institutional language can no longer provide. This pattern is evident in political life, religious movements, and artistic revolutions. Language evolves from poetic silence to rational critique, from critique to institutionalisation, from institution to alienation, and from alienation back to poetic silence. This is the cycle of the genealogy of speech. It is not just a biological process but a cultural one. It mirrors what Elman called the 'conspiracy' of systems interacting to produce novelty. In this case, it is novelty of meaning, novelty of trust, and novelty of community. Wittgenstein once wrote that the limits of my language are the limits of my world. But perhaps our world is limited not by the boundaries of language but by the kinds of conspiracies we allow it to form. Do we breathe together in fear or truth? Do we speak to include or to exclude? Do we trust that our words can reach the other, or do we merely perform them as rituals of belonging?

In a world flooded by information but starved of understanding, the role of language is both more powerful and more fragile than ever. More data does not mean more clarity. In fact, it may generate more confusion. Human nature seems to gravitate not just toward misinformation but toward miscommunication. This is the final irony of the conspiracy of language: the more we say, the less we may understand. The more we share, the less we may connect. To counter this, people must cultivate a language that resists both indoctrination and paranoia. We must listen for silences, embrace ambiguity, and remain suspicious of certainty. Language is never a finished product. It is always a negotiation, a breathing-together that must be renewed with every word. A conspiracy theory of language reveals not a plot to deceive but a pattern of emergence, collapse, and rebirth. It shows how we come together through speech, how we fall apart through dogma, and how we begin again through new sounds, new silences, and new ways of breathing together.

'How to Speak about Books We Haven’t Read'

'How to Speak about Books We Haven’t Read' by Pierre Bayard challenges the dominant cultural narrative that values the act of reading books over the act of speaking meaningfully about them. Bayard suggests that speaking about books we have not read is not only possible, but essential to navigating modern intellectual life. From childhood, we are taught to be ashamed of unread books. The question 'Have you read it?' hangs over literary culture like a trap, provoking embarrassment or guilt. But Bayard argues that such guilt is misplaced. In truth, no one can read everything, and the ability to speak intelligently about a book does not necessarily depend on having read it in full. What matters is orientation—knowing how the book fits into the broader cultural conversation, understanding its themes, reputation, and context. Two people who have never opened the same volume can have a meaningful conversation about it, provided they share the same general frame: its subject, its place in history, its style or impact. Readers must become authors by treating unread books as opportunities for creative interpretation. Speaking about a book without having read it does not have to mean lying. Rather, it involves constructing a personal version of the book—shaped by its cultural echo, reviews, adaptations, and fragments absorbed indirectly. This approach allows each person to inhabit the book through storytelling. If you can speak with enough authority, says Bayard, you might even convince others that you authored the book yourself. This process

turns conversation into a creative act. Retelling a novel by your own standards—never simply summarising or quoting—transforms discussion into a form of authorship. The act of speaking about a book becomes a way of participating in culture, not just consuming it.

This attitude recalls Robert Musil's fictional librarian, who never reads the books in his care but knows their relationships. The value of a book is not located solely in its content, but in its position within the library. Culture, in this sense, is a system of orientation. One does not need to read every book; one needs to know where it fits. Understanding a book's relation to other works, movements, and ideas is often more important than internalising every page. With a good map of the literary world, one can speak with insight even about books one has not read. The ability to discuss books intelligently, then, depends more on navigation than on total knowledge. Mastery of the catalogue—the network of references, influences, and echoes—is key. This emphasis on orientation links to another central idea: the unreliability of memory. In Plato's Phaedrus, Theuth presents the invention of writing to King Thamus as a gift, only to be warned that writing will produce forgetfulness, not memory. Writing creates the illusion of knowledge while weakening our inner faculties. Bayard draws on this insight to explore how we remember books we have read. Even when we read, our mental image of the book changes over time. We rewrite the book in our minds with each recollection, influenced by our experiences, emotions, and conversations. The books we carry within us—the 'inner books'—are not fixed texts but mutable phantoms. As such, we are always speaking about books we have not really read, because the act of remembering distorts them. In this way the boundary between reader and critic is dissolved. Every discussion of a book is inevitably also a discussion of the self. True criticism, he says, is autobiography in disguise. When we analyse a novel, we do so from a position of distance—spatial, temporal, or emotional—that enables reflection. This distance allows us to project our fears, desires, and perspectives onto the book. Criticism becomes a mirror in which we examine our own lives, our own intellectual journey. Even gossip, in its own way, becomes a form of self-exploration, a tool for articulating unspoken parts of the psyche.

The radical insight is that the unread book liberates us. It frees us from the tyranny of the canon and the guilt of incompletion. It allows us to reframe reading not as a duty but as an invitation—to interpret, to imagine, to invent. Reading becomes a form of self-discovery, a way to write our own lives. The act of critical reading does not depend on mastering the text. It depends on using the book as a springboard for self-invention. The book is a pretext; the reader is the real subject. To read critically, then, may mean to not read literally—to look away from the text and turn inward. The unread book becomes a space for creative freedom. The idea that speaking about unread books is a legitimate and even necessary practice is developed further rhetorical technique. In the Roman rhetorical practice of 'suasoria', the speaker imagines addressing an audience—whether senators, citizens, or enemies—in a dramatic monologue. This method trains one's ability to speak persuasively even without firsthand experience. In contemporary terms, it means learning to talk about a novel as if one were inside it, using one's imagination and logic to construct a narrative. The suasoria blends public performance with private thought, transforming the act of speaking into an artistic discipline. Through daily reflection—what the Romans called 'diarium'—we come to understand that each reading, or non-reading, is part of our personal development. The same book read at twenty and then again at forty will yield different insights, not because the book has changed but because we have. Every encounter with literature is a moment in a diary, a line in a lifelong conversation with

ourselves. What matters is not whether we have completed every text, but what those texts, glimpsed or imagined, reveal about us.

Culture is not a static body of knowledge but a living network of references. Instead of reading and remembering everything the ability to move among books is prized —to know what to search for, what to ignore, what to synthesise. Literature is a set of coordinates, not a list of obligations. Speaking about books is a way of speaking about your standpoint in culture. The book becomes a phantom, a ghost we summon to hear our voice. Once freed from the burden of mastery, we can engage with literature creatively. We are not passive recipients of someone else's meaning, but active participants in a collective dream. Even fragments and summaries, once absorbed, become raw material for our own expression. Each quotation, each paraphrase, enters our inner library and is recomposed by our needs. This creative captivity—being held, not by another's authority, but by the stirrings of our own imagination—is what transforms the unread book from a source of shame into a source of strength. Bayard's call is ultimately liberating. In a world where reading lists grow longer by the day, and where literary status often masks insecurity, he invites us to speak freely—not as frauds, but as authors. To speak about books, we have not read is to acknowledge the fluid nature of memory, the creative power of interpretation, and the centrality of the self in all acts of reading. In the end, it is not the book that speaks, but the reader. And the reader, like the storyteller, is always in the process of becoming. Unread books are not symbols of ignorance but catalysts of creativity. In the space between what we know and what we imagine lies a fertile field. It is here that we find the confidence to speak, not to deceive, but to invent. We move beyond cultural shame, beyond rote summary, and into the realm of mythmaking. For what is literature, if not the endless retelling of stories we have never truly read, but have always understood?

Most language resembles speaking about books we have not read, people we have never met, and things we do not truly know. We repeat phrases, tell stories, and voice opinions built from fragments, echoes, and borrowed meanings. Rather than reflecting certainty, our speech is often improvisation—guesswork disguised as truth. Yet this is not a flaw, but a form of shared mythmaking. Language thrives not on perfect knowledge, but on our collective willingness to imagine, invent, and speak as if we understood.

Language of cults

Language is the operating system of belief. In Amanda Montell's 'Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism', she explores how speech—its euphemisms, rhythms, redefinitions, mantras, and silences—binds followers not only to fringe religious movements but also to mainstream corporations, boutique fitness communities, charismatic influencers, and political ideologies. From self-help groups to conspiracy forums, from new religious movements to Instagram coaching collectives, it is language—cultish language—that creates identity, sustains allegiance, and draws the line between who belongs and who does not. Montell introduces the term 'Cultish' to describe a flexible, ubiquitous, and profoundly manipulative register of speech. Cultishness is not restricted to isolated communes or charismatic spiritual leaders; it pervades secular life. CEOs, social media personalities, yoga instructors, and politicians all use the same linguistic tools to cultivate authority and reinforce belief. These tools include euphemistic rebranding of ordinary words, mysterious acronyms, insider catchphrases, and emotionally charged buzzwords that foster an atmosphere of revelation. In every cultish community, language is not just a means of communication—it is a ritual of belonging. What makes cultish

language so powerful? The answer lies in how speech shapes perception. Words are not neutral labels; they are scaffolding for thought, experience, and moral judgment. When a leader introduces a new linguistic code, they are not merely naming reality—they are altering it.

In performative language—utterances that do not describe actions but perform them. When someone says, 'I do' at a wedding or a judge declares 'guilty', the words themselves enact change. Repeated mantras, slogans, or catchphrases in cultish speech function similarly. They do not just reflect reality; they reshape it. Repeating a phrase like 'trust the plan' or 'raise your vibration' reconfigures how one interprets events and experiences. Eventually, reality is filtered entirely through this new lexicon. Even minimal linguistic participation can lead to deeper forms of indoctrination. Newcomers to a community may begin by echoing a chant or adopting a hashtag, believing it harmless. Yet these verbal cues serve as the entry points to group identity. Speech is the easiest behavioural shift and often the first to occur; it feels like play, not surrender. But once language changes, thought and behaviour often follow. Social psychologist Albert Bandura's 1999 study 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities' revealed that people were more likely to inflict harm on individuals who had been labelled with dehumanising terms like 'vermin' or 'animals'. This experiment demonstrates the ethical stakes of language. When followers label outsiders as 'toxic', 'unawakened', or 'asleep', they justify exclusion, condescension, and sometimes even violence. The cultish lexicon serves to affirm the in-group's moral superiority while vilifying dissenters.

Cultish language is not limited to dangerous sects. Corporate jargon, wellness lingo, and startup culture are riddled with phrases designed to obscure power and enforce compliance. Expressions like 'missional synergy', 'intentional community', or 'holistic success metrics' function as ideological armour. They sound profound but discourage scrutiny. They perform depth without offering content. In a corporate setting, language becomes a tool to mask coercion behind the glow of positivity. This phenomenon mirrors what Kendall Davis identifies in theological contexts: words often lose their doctrinal content and become markers of social capital. Phrases like 'authentic Christ-centred community' or 'intentional walk with the Lord' function less to communicate beliefs and more to distinguish insiders from outsiders. The more jargon one can reproduce fluently, the more committed they seem. And the more fluent they are, the harder it becomes to step away without feeling alienated from that identity. These observations resonate with Tara Isabella Burton's claim in ' Strange Rites - New Religions for a Godless World' that modern society is not secular but spiritually self-focused. In this landscape, social media acts as both cult platform and cult leader. Algorithms curate belief systems by feeding users content that confirms their biases and deepens their convictions. 'No 'cult leader' takes advantage of our psychological drives quite like the Algorithm', Montell writes. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok incentivise emotionally charged, simplified messages that can be easily shared and internalised. Hashtags replace hymns. Stories replace scripture. Social media also amplifies what Montell calls the 'New Age spiritual-ese'—a lexicon of vague positivity and pseudo-scientific mysticism. Words like 'alignment', 'manifestation', 'intention', and 'frequency' sound spiritual but lack clear definition. They are appealing precisely because they are malleable. They provide users with the illusion of insight and transformation while asking little in return. The linguistic vagueness invites users to fill in the blanks, making the message feel personal and profound.

But cultish language does more than unite. It silences dissent and halts critical thinking. In 'Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism' (1961) Robert Jay Lifton coined the term

'thought-terminating cliché' (also known as a semantic stop-sign, a thought-stopper, bumper sticker logic, or cliché thinking) to describe expressions designed to end discussion rather than foster it. He referred to the use of clichés, along with 'loading the language', as 'the language of non-thought'. These include phrases like 'it is what it is', 'do not overthink it', or 'just trust the process'. In cultish contexts, such phrases operate as linguistic shields, deflecting doubt and shutting down analysis. Their purpose is not to resolve questions but to declare them off-limits. Montell links this tactic to groups like Scientology, where L. Ron Hubbard's 'Technical Dictionary' offers dense, redefined terms that only insiders understand. This specialised language draws sharp lines between believers and sceptics. The more complex the vocabulary, the more loyal the adherents appear—and the less room there is for scepticism. Keith Raniere's NXIVM operated similarly, with elaborate jargon masking unethical practices. This complexity disguises manipulation as enlightenment.

A 2020 study,[104] 'Compensatory conspicuous communication: Low status increases jargon use', adds a sociological dimension. Brown found that institutions with less cultural capital often compensate with more jargon. Legalese, acronyms, and technical terms are used not to clarify but to impress. People with lower status tend to use more jargon (complex language) to compensate and impress, prioritising status over clarity. Montell applies this insight to cultish environments, where linguistic density becomes a marker of superiority. Understanding the jargon becomes proof of commitment. Not understanding is seen as a failure of character. Cultish language thrives wherever power is unaccountable. In politics, it becomes populist sloganism. In corporations, it is productivity jargon. In spirituality, it is New Age mysticism repackaged for digital consumption. Regardless of context, the linguistic strategy is the same: simplify complex ideas, emotionalise vocabulary, isolate dissenters, and turn language itself into a tool of loyalty. In a secular context, this insight remains relevant. Whenever language is used to claim absolute understanding—whether of politics, health, success, or community—it risks becoming idolatrous. It pretends to speak truth while flattening reality into a system of control.

Recognising cultish language requires listening closely: Who is using this phrase? What does it mean? What emotions does it trigger? What questions does it foreclose? The power of cultish speech lies in its subtlety. It often sounds like healing, community, or clarity. But beneath its glow may lie manipulation. Knowing cultish is a form of linguistic self-defence. It teaches us to decode the words around us, to recognise when speech is being used as a tool of persuasion rather than a path to truth. When we become aware of cultish language, we regain agency—not by rejecting community, but by choosing words that open rather than close, that clarify rather than obscure. Amanda Montell's 'Cultish' offers not only critique but guidance. It is a call to reclaim everyday speech from the gravitational pull of manipulation. Whether in digital spaces, workplaces, or wellness circles, the language we use can either connect us or control us. In an era of linguistic saturation, the choice of words is an ethical act. Language is never neutral. Cultish speech, with its euphemisms, slogans, and codes, manipulates identity, belief, and behaviour. The shamans who control the language often control the community.

[104] Brown, Z. C., Anicich, E. M., & Galinsky, A. D. (2020). Compensatory conspicuous communication: Low status increases jargon use. Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes, 161, 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.07.001

Recognising this manipulation is the first step to resisting it. When we learn to question loaded language and choose clarity over charm, we protect not only our speech but our sense of self.

Corporate jargon

'They' promise you clarity, purpose, confidence, and professional transcendence. For a price. 'They' always speak from the name of 'we', and you feel invited and included. The modern business world is infused with a language that blends aspiration, spirituality, and managerial control—a kind of cultish dialect that sells quick success and emotional certainty. In Sam Blum's 'The Cult-Like Language That's Coursing Through Business', we find that from TED Talks to Instagram life coaches, this language system functions less as communication and more as transformation theatre. It mimics spiritual renewal while funnelling cash and commitment into high-pressure programs offering little oversight and even fewer results. Derek Beres, host of the 'Conspirituality' podcast, describes the essence of this system as 'selling aspiration'. Whether it is multilevel marketing platforms or crypto evangelism, the pitch is always to transcend the ordinary and join an elite circle of insiders. Blum tracks how even cults like Love Has Won (LHW) sold nutritional supplements via livestreams, their sacred message monetised in YouTube's digital temples. In all cases, language is the hook: religious metaphors, motivational refrains, and inflated claims become part of a shared vocabulary. It becomes normal for a company to have a mantra, but it becomes dangerous for a mantra to have a company. As psychologist and cult expert Steve Eichel explains, the line between harmless self-improvement and harmful indoctrination lies in intent. When a content marketer pays $5,000 to a coach who promised a $10,000-a-month business, he gets instead a familiar blend of high-minded promises, vague deliverables, and no refunds. The Federal Trade Commission has begun pushing back, shutting down 'stay-at-home millionaire' frauds and ordering restitution—but most of the ecosystem remains legally and linguistically slippery. How can you censor a promise?

Even once-legitimate ventures fall under the sway of cultic speech. Skyline Movers+Shakers, once a celebrated startup, was co-founded by former students of NXIVM's 'Executive Success Programs'. They boasted a 'revolutionary methodology for fulfilment', yet what they inherited was a vocabulary of abstraction that helped shield deeper dysfunction. The veneer of purpose covered a hollow shell. From this perspective, the language of modern business is not just cultic—it is corporate. In 'Garbage Language: Why Do Corporations Speak the Way They Do?', Molly Young outlines how the workplace has become a fertile ground for a new dialect: pseudo-technical, metaphor-heavy, and emotionally anaesthetized. At one of her former jobs, ordinary words were mutated and elevated. 'Ask', 'win', and 'fail' became nouns. 'Bucket' and 'whiteboard' were turned into verbs. Neologisms like 'replatform' and 'co-execute' proliferated through meetings and memos. Acronyms like RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) floated without clear meaning. 'These phrases took on the veneer of real words', Young writes, 'by sheer repetition'. But this is not just linguistic drift—it is psychological strategy. By using tech metaphors and vague grandiosity, companies inject meaning into otherwise meaningless labour. Jargon acts as balm for anxiety, masking the disappointment of culture perks, burnout, and job insecurity. WeWork's infamous 200,000-word IPO filing, for example, boasted of its mission to 'elevate the world's consciousness'. This cosmic posturing disguised what was essentially a real estate arbitrage business. As Young notes, it required 'medieval exegesis' to distil real meaning from the florid mess. The same

linguistic camouflage was on display in the leaked Slack messages from Away CEO Steph Korey. Under the guise of 'accountability' and 'growth', Korey laid down strict controls on vacation for junior staff. Passive voice and capitalised buzzwords made coercion sound like empowerment. 'Language that could be stretched to any meaning and defended under audit' became the managerial norm. In this atmosphere, the less clear a sentence is, the more plausible deniability it provides.

This theme continues in Jessica Helfand's 'Scammy Flavour: Garbage Language in the Workplace', where the emphasis shifts to the psychological toll of such jargon. In her experience teaching at Yale's School of Management, Helfand observed how students defaulted to phrases like 'looping someone in' or 'taking a deep dive' not to clarify, but to conform. She grouped these into categories: hyphenated mashups ('omni-channel', 'business-critical'), compound phrases ('email blast', 'pain point'), and conceptual hybrids ('shoot an email', 'circle back'). Such terms, she argues, carry 'aspirational authority'. They make young professionals sound savvy, even when their thoughts remain vague. The issue is not only stylistic—it is epistemic. Once internalised, this language becomes hard to forget. Helfand compares hearing an old phrase like 'holistic roadmap' to the feeling of recalling an embarrassing memory. It provokes a cringe of recognition, not because the words are evil, but because they represent a moment when the speaker bought into a lie. These terms are sticky because they promise competence and belonging while requiring very little reflection. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche warned that our 'truths are illusions we have forgotten we created'. Corporate jargon exemplifies this danger. Words like 'optionality' or 'deliverable' sound technical but mean little. Ask an executive to define them precisely, and you will likely enter a spiral of tautologies. The real danger is not just that jargon is empty—it is that it rewards obfuscation. Those who speak the dialect fluently are seen as insightful; those who seek clarity are dismissed as unsophisticated. In both Blum's and Young's accounts, language functions as a tool of emotional seduction and corporate domination. Whether it is a life coach selling spiritual entrepreneurship or a middle manager touting 'operational efficiency', the goal is the same: to mask fragility with performance. When workers internalise this jargon, they become complicit in their own exploitation. They begin to market their subordination as ambition. And as Helfand argues, when this language becomes standard, the workplace becomes a stage for self-branding rather than a space for collaboration or truth.

The consequences are profound. Meaningful dialogue gets drowned out by 'scammy flavour'. Meetings grow longer without growing deeper. Strategies become rituals. Criticism is framed as 'feedback', and firings as 'realignment'. The more meaningless the language, the more valuable it becomes as armour against uncertainty, guilt, and accountability. Corporate jargon is not harmless fluff or trendy shorthand. It is a powerful mechanism for emotional manipulation and structural control. From the cultish promises of career coaches to the euphemisms of CEOs, jargon masks exploitation, conceals failure, and recasts anxiety as empowerment. It transforms language from a tool of understanding into an instrument of mystification—it functions as both mask and mechanism. Behind terms like 'replatform', 'value-add', and 'deep dive' lies a culture of euphemism, where power structures are softened, criticism is deflected, and meaningless tasks are elevated through abstraction. This language does not clarify—it enshrouds. It creates the illusion of productivity, purpose, and innovation while often concealing stagnation, confusion, or coercion. Employees are not just asked to do work; they are expected to narrate it in the company's ritual dialect, turning communication into performance. Jargon becomes a

survival tool in workplaces that value plausible deniability and perpetual optimism over truth. Over time, this rubbish language normalises insincerity, discourages honest expression, and erodes the very function language was meant to serve understanding. To challenge it is not simply to demand better words, but to demand a better workplace—one where meaning is restored, and speech can again serve clarity rather than camouflage. In reclaiming language, we begin to reclaim dignity in work. Rubbish should always be disposed off promptly.

Corporate jargon is not a harmless byproduct of workplace evolution—it is a corrosive force that distorts communication, erodes critical thinking, and quietly suppresses human dignity. Buzzwords masquerade as signs of expertise, but in truth, they trade clarity for conformity. This performative language system turns workplaces into theatres of scripted interaction, where sincerity is suspect and authority is measured by one's fluency in vacuous phrases. Over time, such jargon reshapes professional identity itself, rewarding those who recite rather than reflect, and silencing voices that question or resist. But there is dignity in resistance. When language becomes a tool of subordination, jamming that language becomes a moral act. Today's digital-age Luddites are not those smashing machines, but those quietly disrupting corporate speech from within—refusing the script, choosing plain words, and embodying a more human presence in systems that demand uniformity. Like a 21st-century Bartleby, the modern worker who 'would prefer not to' speak in slogans becomes a quiet revolutionary. Because no institutional goal, no matter how profitable or ambitious, is worth more than the truthfulness of human expression.

'The Babble Hypothesis'

If you want to become a leader, start talking. Not necessarily with brilliance or precision, but with frequency. That is the core finding of a growing body of research into what has come to be called the 'babble hypothesis'—the idea that in group settings, those who speak the most are most likely to be perceived as leaders, regardless of the substance of their contributions. In an era increasingly concerned with merit, equity, and authentic leadership, this conclusion is both unsettling and revealing. The term 'babble hypothesis' was introduced by Neil G. MacLaren and his colleagues, whose comprehensive study[105] 'Testing the Babble Hypothesis: Speaking Time Predicts Leader Emergence in Small Groups', aimed to resolve long-standing questions about what actually causes someone to emerge as a leader in small groups. Their research demonstrates that sheer speaking time—how much a person talks during group activities—predicts leadership emergence better than intelligence, personality traits, or subject-matter expertise. In other words, leadership visibility can be achieved through verbal quantity alone. To test this, MacLaren and his team recruited 256 university students and arranged them into thirty-three groups. These groups were assigned complex problem-solving tasks: either a military computer simulation called 'BCT Commander' or a business planning game named 'CleanStart'. Before the activities began, each group had ten minutes to plan and then an hour

[105] MacLaren, N.G., Yammarino, F.J., Dionne, S.D., Hiroki Sayama, Mumford, M.D., Connelly, S., Martin, R.W., Mulhearn, T.J., Todd, E.M., Kulkarni, A., Cao, Y. and Ruark, G.A. (2020). Testing the Babble Hypothesis: Speaking Time Predicts Leader Emergence in Small Groups. [online] The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). Available at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/management_fac/2/ [Accessed 24 Jun. 2025].

to execute the simulation, with one participant randomly designated as the 'operator' controlling the interface. Before and after each session, group members were asked to nominate classmates whom they believed had acted as leaders.

The results were striking. Individuals who spoke for longer periods were far more likely to be nominated as leaders—regardless of how relevant, helpful, or insightful their remarks were. This finding persisted even after controlling for a wide array of variables, including prior familiarity with the game, measured intelligence, personality traits like extraversion or conscientiousness, and even gender. Speaking time stood out as the single most consistent predictor of leadership perception. While not entirely new, this insight offers a strong rebuttal to traditional leadership theories that emphasise content, vision, or moral authority. It also refines previous research by addressing criticisms of earlier experimental setups that constrained communication or failed to consider the interaction between speaking and leadership perception—a problem known as endogeneity. By designing ecologically valid group settings and tracking speech patterns over time, MacLaren's study corrects those limitations and confirms that verbal frequency alone strongly influences who is seen as a leader. The implications are broad. In collaborative settings where no leader is formally designated, people naturally look for cues about whom to follow. It turns out the most powerful cue is not intelligence or decisiveness, but presence—and in group dynamics, presence is signalled primarily by speech. The person who talks most appears engaged, confident, and assertive, regardless of whether their words carry weight. The more someone dominates the verbal space, the more others instinctively defer to their influence. Further nuance comes from findings about gender dynamics. On average, men received more leadership nominations, even when their speech patterns mirrored those of women in the group. According to MacLaren, men gained 'an extra vote just for being a man', a bias that became more pronounced among those who received the highest numbers of votes. This suggests that the babble effect is not entirely neutral or meritocratic; it is entangled with social expectations and implicit biases that further complicate the landscape of leadership perception.

Critics of the babble hypothesis have long pointed to the importance of substance. Some argued that relevance and benefit to the group should matter more than the sheer quantity of speech. He also raised endogeneity concerns, warning that speaking time might reflect existing perceptions of leadership, rather than cause them. However, MacLaren's team accounted for these variables, offering evidence that even when the speech content is relatively weak—or even irrelevant—participants who dominate conversation still emerge as leaders. This does not mean content is meaningless. In structured organisations or professional environments where performance is measured and accountability is high, empty verbosity can only go so far. Yet the study highlights a deeper truth about human social behaviour: we often equate visibility with authority, noise with competence, and confidence with capability. In many settings, especially informal or creative ones, the act of speaking frequently becomes a performance of leadership itself. Beyond academic research, these findings resonate with everyday experiences in offices, classrooms, meetings, and online forums. We have all witnessed individuals who say little but offer sharp, valuable insights—only to be overlooked. Meanwhile, others dominate conversations with rambling, redundant, or shallow remarks and are rewarded with attention, deference, or leadership roles. The babble hypothesis crystallises this phenomenon: talk enough, and people will listen—not necessarily because of what you say, but because you are saying it.

Understanding the babble effect forces us to re-examine how leadership is identified, rewarded, and cultivated. If speaking more makes you more likely to be seen as a leader, this opens strategic opportunities—but also ethical questions. Should organisations coach employees to speak more just to increase their visibility, even if their ideas add little value? Should leadership training programs prioritise voice over insight? And how can quieter individuals—who may be more thoughtful, reflective, or informed—gain recognition in systems that privilege verbal dominance? There is also the question of resistance. Recognising that language can be used to simulate leadership without embodying it raises the possibility of sabotage—from within. Those who refuse to play the game of performative speech, who quietly abstain from meaningless chatter, may be engaging in a form of modern defiance. In a culture where talk is rewarded over thought, the refusal to babble is radical. Today's workplace dissenters—the silent analysts, the sceptical listeners, the disrupters of empty talk—are not disengaged. They are resisting a system that equates noise with value. They do not parrot slogans. Do not engage in performative verbosity and do not mistake volume for vision. In an environment obsessed with articulation, there is something subversive in silence, or in the deliberate use of words that resist conformity and reclaim meaning. The babble hypothesis is not just a psychological curiosity; it is a mirror reflecting how fragile our markers of leadership really are.

The babble hypothesis reveals that leadership in groups often hinges less on the quality of what is said and more on how often it is said. This insight is both revealing and disturbing, exposing how easily perception overrides substance in our social and professional lives. But awareness of this mechanism offers an opening for resistance. In a world where speech is currency, and babble buys influence, the quiet refusal to engage in empty talk becomes a form of rebellion. Human dignity lies not in the volume of our words but in their meaning. Any system—corporate, academic, or political—that rewards noise over thought undermines that dignity. The true task is not to teach everyone to speak more, but to build cultures where speaking less, and saying more, is finally enough. In such a world, the leader is not the loudest voice in the room, but the one who knows when to speak—and when to listen. The babble hypothesis exposes a troubling linguistic reality: that the quantity of speech is often mistaken for quality, wisdom, or leadership. This mindset distorts the purpose of language, shifting it from a tool of understanding to a performance of dominance. When 'more' becomes synonymous with 'better', thoughtful silence and meaningful brevity are devalued. Such a practice corrodes genuine communication, rewarding noise over insight and eroding trust in discourse itself. The result is a culture where verbosity triumphs over clarity, and language becomes inflated, manipulative, and hollow. Resisting this trend is essential—not only for fair leadership but for preserving the integrity of language as a shared human good.

Linguistic power structures

For over a century, the Western philosophical tradition has wrestled with the collapse of certainty. What once appeared as stable foundations—God, truth, the self, and language—have been systematically dismantled. The metaphysical desire for an origin, a centre that grounds meaning, has given way to a recognition that no such centre exists. What remains is a landscape shaped not by stable meaning but by shifting linguistic power structures. In this new terrain, language is no longer the transparent medium through which we access truth. It is the very site where power is negotiated, where authority is claimed and contested, where meaning is made

and unmade. Jacques Derrida's landmark 1966 lecture 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' marks a turning point. Derrida names three precursors who cracked the foundation of Western metaphysics. Friedrich Nietzsche declared the death of God, unmooring moral and ontological certainty. Sigmund Freud destabilised the self, revealing it as a fractured, unconscious construct. Martin Heidegger erased the metaphysical illusion of pure presence, instead grounding existence in temporality, in the thrown and situated nature of human beings. Together, they dismantled the triad of God, self, and language—displacing the Logos that once anchored Western thought. Derrida's concept of 'différance', a pun on both 'difference' and 'deferral', captures the new condition of meaning. In place of fixed reference, we find a web of signs, each pointing to another, endlessly deferring presence. There is no transcendental signified—no final term that halts the chain. Meaning becomes a function of relational difference, not inherent essence. In this system, there is no pristine language, no universal grammar that guarantees truth. There is only 'parole', individual utterances shaped by context and power, and never reducible to a unified 'langue'.

What follows is not linguistic anarchy but a new kind of order—one governed by the structures of speech, rhetoric, and performance. Language does not mirror reality; it constructs it. Every utterance participates in a dynamic of power. To speak is not just to describe the world but to shape it, impose categories, draw boundaries, and define others. In Derrida's hands, deconstruction becomes more than a method of critique—it becomes an act of intervention, exposing how language legitimates authority and opens possibilities for resistance. Paul de Man's theory of rhetorical reading advances this insight within the realm of literary criticism. He contends that readers habitually impose stable meanings onto texts, mistaking metaphor and ambiguity for literal assertions. In his essay 'Semiology and Rhetoric', de Man analyses the line from Yeats—'How can we know the dancer from the dance?'—to illustrate the instability of meaning. Grammatically a question, it is conventionally read as a rhetorical assertion of unity. The line resists a single interpretation, and this resistance, for de Man, is not a failure of clarity but a reflection of language's nature: figurative, shifting, and unstable. De Man's approach is a form of linguistic scepticism, a via negativa that strips away illusions of interpretive certainty. For him, literature is uniquely poised to reveal the mechanics of meaning-making, because it foregrounds rhetorical devices rather than disguising them. Where traditional reading seeks coherence, rhetorical reading accepts undecidability. It asks not 'What does this mean?' but 'How does this text make meaning—and unmake it at the same time?' This method reveals that even the most 'literal' language carries figurative tensions. And yet, de Man's approach ultimately leaves us with no final interpretive ground, no resting place. The work of interpretation is never finished; every assertion opens the door to further deconstruction.

Yet, this endless process is not without cost. Critics of deconstruction note how its emphasis on textual instability can become a trap, a self-replicating loop where meaning constantly recedes, and political or ethical claims seem impossible to ground. De Man himself became a symbol of this impasse. As Louis Menand observes, his intellectual rigour was inseparable from a chilling detachment. The same relentless scepticism that laid bare the mechanisms of language also stripped away moral commitments. Deconstruction thus risks becoming a purely formal exercise unless tethered to ethical or political stakes. Hermeneutics offers a different, though related, response to the collapse of metaphysical certainty. It too begins with the recognition that understanding is never neutral or objective. In philosophical hermeneutics, spearheaded by Heidegger and developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer,

interpretation is seen as a historical and dialogical process. We do not encounter texts from an untouched vantage point; we bring with us a 'historically effected consciousness', shaped by culture, language, and prior understanding. Gadamer's concept of the 'fusion of horizons' describes how meaning arises when the world of the text encounters the world of the reader. This meeting does not erase differences but creates a space for dialogue. There is no final horizon, no universal perspective from which total understanding is possible. Yet, understanding still occurs—not as reproduction, but as transformation. Gadamer challenges the notion that we can recover an author's pure intention or extract a text's fixed meaning. Instead, we must acknowledge the interpretive event as situated, dynamic, and partial.

Paul Ricoeur adds to this hermeneutic tradition by emphasising the productive role of metaphor. In 'The Rule of Metaphor', he argues that figurative language is not merely decorative but generative. Metaphor disrupts literal meaning, forcing us to see things anew. This creative capacity of language opens interpretive possibilities that propositional language cannot reach. For Ricoeur, interpretation is not just a matter of decoding but of imagination—a constructive act grounded in the flexibility and inventiveness of language itself. This view is further radicalised by thinkers like Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson, who dismantle the boundary between language and reality altogether. Rorty's 'World Well Lost' contends that our descriptions of the world are always embedded in linguistic frameworks. There is no pure 'given' experience outside language. Davidson, similarly, critiques the notion of conceptual schemes, arguing that the idea of scheme-independent content is incoherent. For both, language is not a medium that represents the world; it is the fabric out of which our sense of reality is made. Taken together, these perspectives challenge the very foundation of Western metaphysics—the belief that language can guarantee stable reference to an external truth. Instead, language emerges as a field of play, power, and possibility. It is where human understanding, political authority, and cultural identity are constructed and contested. The 'truth' of a text, a leader, or a community does not reside in an original essence but in the shifting interplay of interpretation and rhetorical force.

The implications of this shift are vast. If language is the site of power, then every speech act carries political weight. Every interpretation reconfigures the social order. The philosopher, the critic, the poet, and the citizen all engage in the same fundamental activity: shaping the world through language. But this also makes language a battleground. The loss of metaphysical foundations does not leave us in a vacuum—it thrusts us into a space where every utterance, every metaphor, every translation is a potential exercise of domination or liberation. What begins as a critique of metaphysics ends with a radical revaluation of language. In the absence of God, self, or Logos, what remains is not silence or nihilism but speech—restless, plural, and deeply political. Language is no longer a neutral bridge to truth but the terrain on which truths are made and unmade. We live within linguistic power structures that frame how we know, who we trust, and what we imagine possible. To speak, write, interpret, or remain silent is to participate in these structures—sometimes reinforcing them, sometimes resisting. Understanding this is not only a matter of theory; it is a matter of ethical and political urgency. In a world without fixed meaning, a new paradigm of language is our greatest hope. Language stands as the last bastion of human civilisation as a cult of power, where meaning is authority, and culture is discipline. As digitalisation absorbs all written expression and AI reshapes communication, the battle over language becomes a battle over reality itself. The lost control over language—its interpretation, production, and distribution—opens a possibility of new

narratives of the world. In this unfolding era, the struggle for language is inseparable from the struggle for novelty and change in the power structure.

The self as linguistic problem

For over two and a half millennia, human beings have asked: what is the self? Yet despite its centrality, the self remains elusive, distant—rarely felt in the rhythm of daily life. We do not experience ourselves as pure centres of meaning but as fractured presences responding to external noise. In our era, defined by complexity, technological saturation, and the collapse of shared narratives, the question of selfhood returns with renewed urgency. If the self is foundational, why does it so often seem absent, disoriented, or displaced? Modern life overwhelms us with information, creating chaos in which coherence becomes difficult. Lacking a clear myth or stable narrative to live by, we are left to pursue significance in fragments. Despair arises—not only in a clinical sense, but in its original etymology: a condition of losing hope. Our identities dissolve into shifting roles, driven more by recognition than by rootedness. In this void, the only stability we find often lies in communal rituals and the stories we agree to uphold. They offer temporary coherence to our role-playing selves, yet even these fictions increasingly feel thin and provisional. This erosion of identity and meaning has intellectual roots. Three towering figures—Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche—have shaped our collective suspicion toward all claims of truth. Freud taught that our beliefs, especially religious ones, mask psychological needs; they are comforting illusions born of infantile dependence. Marx showed that the ideas ruling an age are always those of the ruling class, structured to preserve power. Nietzsche, most ruthlessly, revealed how our morality often cloaks resentment and weakness in a garb of virtue. Together, these 'masters of suspicion' shattered metaphysical innocence. What had once appeared sacred now seemed strategic, rhetorical, or neurotic. In the wake of their critiques, a new cultural condition emerged—what Richard Rorty called 'a world well lost'. Certainty gave way to irony. Philosophy appeared exhausted, unable to recover its foundations. Many turned either to cynicism, where every idea is seen as a mask for self-interest, or to a terrified relativism, where no idea can be criticised without inviting charges of cruelty. In this landscape, conviction itself becomes suspect, a sign not of strength but of hidden agendas.

And yet, amidst this devastation, something human survives. If truth no longer arrives as revelation or system, it may still appear in the form of encounter, relationship, and kindness. Rather than seeking a final theory of the self, we might begin again by listening to others, borrowing language from many traditions without demanding exclusive ownership of any. The figure of the philosopher-poet, or the wounded healer becomes an ethical model: someone who practices humanity, not someone who claims to possess it. As Goethe wrote, 'Werde der, der du bist'—become who you are. This is not a path to conquest but to compassion. In this spirit, the self is not a possession but a practice. We become ourselves not through self-assertion but through openness—through attention to others, through acts of imagination and care. Fixed identities give way to relational selves, shaped in dialogue and narrative. When we treat others as ends in themselves, rather than means to our ambitions, we recover the original power of language—not to dominate but to connect. But the danger of illusion remains, especially when authority and recognition are conflated with insight. The ancient warning, 'sutor ne ultra crepidam'—let the shoemaker not judge beyond the shoe—reminds us to stay within the limits of our knowledge. Yet modern culture, saturated with opinion, rarely heeds this. This

ultracrepidarian impulse continues, in politics, social media, and public discourse: people feel compelled to comment on everything, even without understanding anything. Surveys generate opinions rather than capture them. Appearances of certainty often mask emptiness. This desire to appear authoritative extends even into the most elite circles. The phenomenon known as 'Nobel disease' illustrates how prestigious figures—especially Nobel laureates—sometimes opine confidently on topics far outside their domain. Prestige shelters arrogance. The problem reflects a deeper temptation in all public discourse: to equate status with wisdom, and to treat speech as performance rather than inquiry.

In Immanuel Kant's philosophy, particularly within his legal theory (Rechtslehre), laws are understood as universal and objective principles, not as specific rules tied to individuals or situations. This means laws should not be formulated using proper names or referencing specific individuals. But using universal and rational language is always a sign of a power play. The rational language of laws and rules serves the power agenda. The proper language of love uses proper names. More than that all people, places, or things around become proper, specific, and unique. Instead of alienation this 'proper language' brings communion. Proper language use demands humility. It is the linguistic expression of the Self. Using the universal language of laws and rules is just rendition of an abstract rationality. The Self is not included in this collective voice of reason and wisdom. True communication must be rooted in local understanding, empirical observation, and lived experience. Without this, even the most eloquent expression becomes hollow tool of control. Every speaker carries identity, bias, and motivation. Every sentence, however benign, carries potential to clarify—or to manipulate. In this way, language becomes not only a mirror of the self but a battlefield of power.

People are, as many philosophers note, Homo significans: the meaning-seeking animal. We crave not just existence but significance. We invent stories not merely to entertain but to live in. And yet, we are not only 'Homo significans' but also 'Homo esperans'—the human who hopes. We hope for change, for renewal, for meaning beyond repetition. But we find ourselves trapped in cycles where only the slogans and costumes change. The core power structures remain untouched: relations defined by control, not care; societies built on hierarchy, not dignity. In such a world, the dream of the self begins to dissolve. The opposite of love is not hate, but power. Hate still recognises the other as real. Power denies the other’s subjectivity, reducing people to tools. Language of power is never a language of love. Language, in its original form, was not created for domination, but for communion. It was meant to name the world, to negotiate with nature, not to enslave fellow humans. When language becomes an instrument of manipulation—when it serves systems of control rather than mutual recognition—it destroys both meaning and identity.

The real self of every human being is not some abstract essence, but the right to stand equal to any other, to speak truthfully, to be heard, and to love. When societies reduce language to mere propaganda, when human beings are treated as means rather than ends, the very notion of the self is eroded. Without mutual recognition, there can be no self—only masks, roles, or simulations. Civilisation, then, becomes a power structure with no soul. If existence becomes merely a race to be more powerful than others, to exploit them for one’s gain, then we lose more than community—we lose the reason to exist at all. The self shrinks into a managerial fiction, calibrated for performance and status but hollow inside. In such a world, there is no dignity, only spectacle. The question of the self has haunted human thought for 2500 years, and no final answer has emerged. But perhaps that is because the self is not an answer—it is a problem, a

practice, a possibility. In a time of data saturation, role fatigue, and linguistic inflation, our task is not to secure the self through doctrine, but to open it through dialogue. The future of meaning rests not on dominance but on shared stories, not on superiority but on mutual recognition. To be truly human is not to assert power over others, but to use language for love, for understanding, for dignity. In this lies the only self worth preserving. At the end, the self is its language.

People as meaning makers

Human beings are not just rational or social animals—we are meaning makers. If language is the house of the self, then meaning is its furniture. The shortest description of linguistic meaning is a story, some structure, a narrative. The existential condition for meaning is an interpretive community. From early childhood, 'we'(me and the others around) construct significance out of sound, symbol, and story. We reach beyond what is given and build internal maps to navigate experience. This impulse is not incidental; it is central to our humanity. Meaning is not handed to us fully formed. Rather, we create it actively and individually, shaping the world in our image while being shaped by it in return. Even shared language systems depend on this deeply personal act of sense-making. If a word, symbol, or story fails to resonate on an individual level, it remains inert—an empty vessel. Language offers a shared vocabulary, but it is the listener or reader who brings it to life. The signs and utterances we use every day carry potential, not essence. Their power is unlocked only when someone makes sense of them. Meaning emerges when inner consciousness and outer symbol meet. This is why individuality plays such a crucial role in communication: each of us interprets words and events through the lens of our own experience, desires, and needs. Language is always social—but understanding is always personal. In Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, all thinking is sign processing. He identifies three kinds of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon resembles its object, like a photograph of a tree. An index is causally or contextually linked to its object, like smoke signalling fire. A symbol, by contrast, holds no resemblance or natural tie to its referent—it relies entirely on social convention. The word 'tree', for example, has meaning not because it looks or sounds like a tree, but because we have collectively agreed to use it in that way. But even that agreement is abstract unless everyone affirms it through use and recognition.

A sign is just an identifying mark, a token, a distinction carved into a background of undifferentiated reality. Meaning begins with negation: this, not that. Every sign is defined by contrast, and every interpretation depends on framing. We are constantly isolating patterns from noise, constructing concepts out of the formless flux of life. The identity of a sign emerges not from its intrinsic qualities, but from its position within a system of difference. To interpret is to stand between form and content, between signifier and signified. The Latin root 'interpres' suggests mediation, translation, and negotiation. There must be an interpretative community to agree on meaning. We are always interpreting—our surroundings, each other, the words we read, the stories we hear. Meaning is neither imposed from above nor found pre-existing beneath the surface; it arises in the act of relation. Communication, therefore, depends not on perfect transmission but on overlapping fields of reference. Consensus is less a fixed outcome than an ongoing process—one forged through conversation, compromise, and the mutual shaping of symbols. Shared meaning is the product of dialogue. While repetition can instil habits, it is through stories, metaphors, and collective rituals that symbols gain real traction in social life. These stories provide maps of orientation—guides for action, frameworks for belief.

They are less about truth in an absolute sense and more about coherence, emotional resonance, and shared vision. Our social reality is always under construction, negotiated through the interplay of personal interpretation and communal affirmation.

This negotiation extends even to the so-called hard sciences. In the empirical realm, experiments must be designed, variables defined, and outcomes interpreted—all within the parameters of a conceptual framework. We do not encounter raw reality; we model it. What we see is shaped by the signs we use to see with. That which lies outside our system of signs remains, for all practical purposes, invisible. Language carves the world into meaningful shapes. Without it, everything dissolves into inchoate sensation. Umberto Eco's concept of the 'open work' of art illustrates this interpretive dynamic in literature. For Eco, a text is not a closed container of meaning but a structured invitation. The author does not deliver a final truth but arranges signs that guide and anticipate the reader's participation. The reader, in turn, brings their own knowledge, emotions, and imagination to bear. Meaning arises through this collaboration. The blank spaces in a text—the ambiguities, the ellipses, the unspoken—are not flaws but essential sites of engagement. The reader completes the work. This collaborative process is not limited to literature. In storytelling at large meaning is built through layered construction. The narrative draws in the audience by presenting a coherent world grounded in familiar cues: road signs, cultural references, recognisable emotions. The reader enters this constructed reality not as a passive observer but as an emotionally engaged participant.

Beneath this, there are deeper structural layers: the theme that resonates across experience; the historical grounding that situates the story in time; the subtext that conveys hidden tensions; and the spirit of the time that reflects broader cultural dynamics. Characters, meanwhile, are not portraits of real individuals but metaphoric composites—bundles of contradiction and desire that embody the dilemmas we all face. Their journeys give form to our inner conflicts. Expanding on this architecture, showing how stories function as moral laboratories. Through turning points and value shifts, narratives enact the drama of transformation. Every scene, sequence, and act is charged with emotional energy that tests the protagonist's beliefs. Any type of plot serves the same function: to shape human understanding through the orchestration of experience. Fiction is not fantasy—it is compression. It captures the defining moments that reveal character, morality, and change. In the hero's journey, the truth of the self is revealed under pressure. Character is not what someone says or believes—it is what they choose in the crucible of conflict. The tension between aspiration and reality, between image and action, between hope and consequence, forms the core of dramatic meaning. Irony sharpens this tension. Every story that ends in triumph also carries a note of loss; every lesson learnt has a cost. Beneath the surface lies the abyss—a reminder that reality always exceeds our narratives, that uncertainty endures beyond every plot resolution.

But conflict is not just a narrative device; it is the pulse of life. Scarcity, competition, contradiction—these forces define our existence. Our beliefs rarely align seamlessly with experience. The friction between them drives both suffering and growth. The hero's journey is not an escape from conflict but a confrontation with it. Through the hero's trials, we see ourselves more clearly. We recognise that our own meaning-making occurs not in clarity but in struggle. And struggle is not only external. Within each of us lives the tension between the desire for significance and the limits of language. We long to say something true about who we are, what matters, why we act—but words often falter. Still, we keep speaking, writing, imagining. This persistence is what makes us going. It is not certainty but the refusal to abandon

the search for meaning that defines us. Yet we are not only meaning-makers—we are also visionaries. We yearn not only to understand the world but to change it, not necessarily for the better. The hope for better future, however, is not always noble. Trapped in cycles of repetition, where the slogans change but the power structures remain, our narratives can become instruments of illusion. Language, at its best, is not for controlling others but for understanding and uniting with them. It is our bridge across solitude, our instrument of communion. When we use it to dominate, we sever that bridge. When we shape meaning only to assert status or claim superiority, we distort the very function of language. Meaning then becomes a weapon, and identity collapses into performance. People are the makers of meaning—interpreters, storytellers, dreamers. Our shared symbols shape cooperation, but it is the personal inflection, the act of living and believing through language, that gives them depth. Stories orient us, dialogue refines us, and imagination connects us to realities not yet seen. To be human is to inhabit this creative tension—to speak into the void, to listen across difference, and to make the world matter through the meanings we choose to share.

Speaking precedes thinking

Plato, in the 'Republic', reveals a vision of a harmonious society built upon fabricated but functional myths. His 'noble lie' of the metals—gold for rulers, silver for warriors, and bronze and iron for the working classes—is not meant to be true but to sustain social unity. Even reproduction is managed with this same narrative purpose: arranged mating for the many, selective breeding for the elite. These are myths not for amusement but for direction, engineering virtue through repetition and belief. What matters is not their factual accuracy but their ability to mould a coherent worldview. Plato’s truth lies not in data for all times but in concrete dialogue. His politics of speech governs his politics of truth: the myth that convinces becomes the truth that governs. This preference for living speech over inert text is crystallised in his 'Seventh Letter'. There he confesses distrust of writing, warning that true philosophy cannot be bottled into scrolls or treatises. Thought, he believes, must be animated by the immediacy of spoken inquiry. His written dialogues simulate speech, but even they cannot fully capture what transpires in direct encounter. Writing, for Plato, is an imitation of a process whose vitality lies in the breath, the gesture, the unpredictable rhythm of dialogue. Language is not a storehouse but a living fire: to speak is not just to express thought but to generate it in real time, in concert with another. Writing ossifies what speech performs. The philosopher’s mission, then, is not transcription but conversation. Meaning is born between voices of living people, not between pages.

Niklas Luhmann adds complexity to this view with his theory of 'second-degree articulation'. At the first degree, we think in the intimacy of interior monologue and the raw immediacy of speech. At the second, we think through writing, editing, and publication, distancing ourselves from direct experience. The spoken word emerges within the moment; the written word creates a structure over time. Yet there is even a third degree: reflection about the ways we think and speak. In this loop of meta-communication, language turns back on itself—we discuss how we discuss, write about writing, read about reading. Thought becomes recursive, layered, no longer immediate but mediated by multiple levels of representation. The concept of 'second-degree objectivity' follows a similar path. Initially, we seek truth by comparing appearances to facts. But in a more complex world, objectivity requires mapping the positions in a dispute, not pretending all views are equal, but understanding how each is

situated. Speaking becomes a performance of positioning. Writing about a controversy is not about extracting neutral truth but revealing the logic of competing claims. Objectivity thus shifts from sterile impartiality to a dynamic field of contested meanings, each shaped by the speakers' access to voice, evidence, and trust. In this context, the very act of communication becomes a negotiation of reality. What we say is shaped not just by what we know, but by who we are and how we are heard.

Hegel, in the 'Phenomenology of Spirit', radicalises this further. For him, appearance is not a veil concealing truth but the necessary form through which truth emerges. The essence of a thing is always mediated by how it shows itself. Appearance precedes essence—not chronologically, but epistemologically. We cannot access what a thing 'is' except through its shifting forms. No appearance is final, yet each contributes to the unfolding of truth. Reality, for Hegel, is a drama of becoming, where each moment of showing points beyond itself. Knowing is an act of appearance reception: a reading of the world's gestures. This aligns with Karl Popper's insistence on falsifiability: what we claim to know must be open to contradiction. Even lies help shape our notion of truth—by falsifying a claim, we become clearer about what is true. Fake news, in this sense, becomes an epistemological catalyst. We reject it not just for being false, but because its appearance fails to correspond with what we believe must be real. Still, this invites a deeper question: is truth what corresponds to reality, or simply what survives in our shared symbolic frameworks? If every 'truth' depends on its appearance, then language becomes our only access to reality—but also its greatest distortion.

Alan Bullock explored this paradox in his 1975 essay 'A Language for Life'. He drew a sharp contrast between speech and writing. Speech, he claimed, unfolds in time, organised around tone groups—each unit carrying a single idea. Writing, by contrast, compacts multiple ideas into more intricate structures. Speech depends on voice, gesture, and intonation; writing relies on grammar, syntax, and punctuation. The speaker must improvise clarity through tone; the writer must anticipate misunderstandings. The two are not merely stylistic variants but separate modes of consciousness. Poetry, Bullock argued, attempts to recover speech's immediacy through rhythm and repetition. A poem resembles live speech: it sounds out meaning. But literature, especially narrative prose, leans toward writing's complexity. It constructs elaborate mental architecture, where ideas unfold not through sound but structure. Storytelling, even when improvised, never emerges from a blank slate. It always draws from shared plot conventions, character arcs, and emotional beats. Even spontaneous speech borrows from remembered stories. All language is strategy: the teller orchestrates tone and timing to shape response. Bullock also considered how Grice's maxims differ in speech and writing. In spoken conversation, brevity is a virtue; in writing, detail is praised. Oral language depends on immediate relevance and tone, whereas written prose allows for ambiguity, subtext, and indirection. Children learn to speak long before they master punctuation. The written page demands a new kind of attention, where even pauses—expressed as commas—must be learnt. Writing dislocates language from the body.

The problem of audience further complicates writing. Speech always assumes a listener present in time; writing must invent an absent reader. Early writers often under-communicate, assuming a shared context that does not exist. Unlike conversation, where confusion can be cleared instantly, writing must predict misunderstanding. This is not just a technical skill but an imaginative act: to write is to simulate dialogue in solitude. Bullock warned of 'linguistic feudalism'—the global dominance of a few prestige languages. Just as Latin once ruled

scholarship, now English command science, diplomacy, and publishing. The empire of writing flattens language; the republic of speech preserves its soul. There is no single universal language. Creoles and patois defy standard grammar but preserve vital oral cultures. Jamaican English and Haitian Creole may share roots, but their rhythm, pitch, and connotation diverge. A standardised text cannot convey this. Writing is stored, copied, and enforced; speech dances with the moment. Meaning in speech is born through relation. It exists only when heard. To speak is to create a world together, even if only for a breath.

Silence is the final frontier of speech: its absence. Silence is not emptiness but fullness without interruption. It suspends the ego, interrupts internal monologue, and opens the possibility of encountering the world anew. In stillness, we rediscover what our words obscure: peace, presence, attention. Silence is a negation of speech's performance, a refuge from language's ambition to name and control. Yet silence is never pure. Even in quietude, we hear foreign voices. What we think of as stillness is always populated by parasite words. Silence is not the absence of meaning but its rarest form—one that resists articulation. It is not merely a rest from speech but a condition in which truth becomes audible. Noise crowds our minds; silence cleanses them. Silence heals. Human speech, amplified without care, can be the most damaging noise of all. Silence, then, is not luxury—it is necessity. It restores the inner conditions required for speaking with attention. Silence cannot be taught through discourse; it must be experienced. In its stillness, we sense what matters beyond words. We exit the game of linguistic manipulation and enter void. Language creates worlds, but silence reminds us of the cost. To speak is to begin, but to be silent is to let being speak through us. Speaking precedes thinking not only in time but in nature. It arises from the body and the moment, tethered to gesture, breath, and the other. The world is first encountered in sound—whether voiced or hushed—and only later fixed in symbol. Thought does not precede speech. It arises from it.

Conspiracy is consensus

Public opinion often reflects common stereotypes, shifting as data and framing change. What appears to be a shared view is frequently a residue of repeated narratives, dissolving into entropy as personal viewpoints dissolve into collective information networks. Rather than emerging from deep reflection or genuine consensus, opinion forms around the visible edges of accepted discourse. As Michel Foucault once suggested in 'Symphony in the City', truth is not discovered but fought for—a constant struggle between signal and noise, where every utterance becomes noise to someone. In a world of such communicative overload, synchrony becomes difficult. To align with reality or others, one must choose whether to fight, flee, or simply abide. We do not live in a world of coordinated deception, but of spiralling agreement, where speech turns in on itself, mimicking coherence while accelerating toward disorder. Speech, at its root, is physical. It is sound and vibration—an accident of air and body. Its significance arises not from any intrinsic property, but from the intentions behind it and the collective recognition it receives. Most spoken words are casual and unpremeditated—incidental, circumstantial, and often disposable. They emerge from momentary needs or social habits, not profound truths. These utterances are not signs of conspiracy but the residue of consensus: language that has been edited, conventionalised, and stripped of urgency. Similarly, written language is only meaningful as far as it has been socially accepted. Words on a page are graffiti—signs with no essence unless interpreted. Like images formed by light, written words are arbitrary until a group agrees to treat them as real. Neither objects nor words are static. Art attempts to freeze

movement, to capture something that is always changing. But language lives only in its usage, and its stability is a performance—a shared illusion. Meaning is forged through a calculus of social consent.

The goal, however, is not uniformity, but synchronicity. Civilisation thrives not by compelling everyone to think the same, but by enabling different individuals to move in coordinated rhythm. This is the essence of collective resonance—an improvisational harmony that binds people together without dissolving their individuality. In a stadium full of chanting fans, or in a global moment of shared feeling, we see how unity emerges not from coercion but from mutual alignment. The amphitheatre, the screen, the crowd: these are the stages of civilisation's self-organisation. Such events are not conspiracies—they are moments where consensus achieves temporary balance. And yet, true synchrony cannot be found in noise alone. It requires silence—the pauses between words, the spaces that allow for listening. In silence, we find our tribe. It is not the multitude we seek, but the few with whom our frequencies align. In the quiet, like oxygen to the soul, we recognise the reality around us and the people who truly hear us. Without silence, there is only cacophony—no room for discernment, no space for resonance. The illusion of power in rhetorical mastery must also be questioned. Language that aims to dominate others—through persuasion, manipulation, or spectacle—rarely leads to clarity. Instead, it traps the speaker in a game of appearances, where victory depends on social performance rather than truth. To reject these zero-sum social games—family politics, online mobs, professional gossip—is to reclaim the self. It is an act of unlearning, of making space for thoughts not shaped by external noise. Language becomes meaningful only when it emerges from inward stillness, not reactive chatter.

Our language conditions our perception. The structures of our tongues shape how we think, judge, and relate. But this shaping is also a limitation. Linguistic systems create walls: rules that seem necessary but are in fact contingent. To escape the tyranny of consensus, we must treat language as provisional—every discourse as optional, every name as a choice. Meaning is never fixed, only negotiated. The freedom to name, or to remain silent, is the essence of human dignity. The world is not an abstract totality, but an immediate field of experience. Maps, platforms, and ideological grids obscure the concrete. To live is to trust what the senses perceive—to see, hear, and feel without mediation. This is not a retreat into subjectivism but a return to the tangible. In the age of simulations and abstractions, disintermediation becomes an ethical act. Reality, in the end, is not what others say it is—it is what you encounter. What is often dismissed as conspiracy—an orchestrated manipulation of language and belief—is in fact consensus: the slow, unconscious sedimentation of shared codes, signs, and permissions. After World War II, the West embraced a consensus shaped not by open debate but by trauma. In fear of the return of fascism, societies accepted a moral and ideological structure based on suspicion of conviction. Like the Olympian gods who ruled to prevent the chaos of the Titans, this new order was accepted because the alternative—ideological catastrophe—was too great a risk. The monstrous twins of Hobbes—Leviathan and Behemoth—still haunt us. Better the bureaucratic state than the horrors of civil war. But this pact came at a cost: language itself became ritualised, and meaning became subordinate to safety.

Truth was no longer something to be pursued, but something to be avoided. Strong convictions were equated with violence. Thus, the vocabulary of politics, education, and culture shifted from affirmation to negation. The old metaphysical certainties—God, nation, family, sex—were displaced by procedural terms: openness, inclusivity, neutrality. A whole new

lexicon was constructed not to describe reality, but to replace it. Words no longer pointed to things—they pointed to each other. In this environment, the accusation of 'fascism' became a linguistic ritual. It no longer referred to specific political regimes but to deviations from consensus. Someone who violated the speech codes—by insisting on biological sex, religious truth, or cultural tradition—was branded with the same label once reserved for totalitarian dictators. Language became self-referential. Every utterance was judged not by its truth but by its conformity. Consensus became the ruling deity, and all heretics were those who broke the spell of sanctioned language. Concepts like 'justice', 'democracy', and 'equality' became incantations—used more for effect than substance. To invoke them was to demonstrate loyalty, not to advance understanding. As these words multiplied, their meanings thinned. Their very ubiquity emptied them. This is how entropy enters speech: not through silence, but through excess.

Eventually, even consensus breaks. Words that once held empires together fall into parody. New ones rise, created to signal new virtues, new anxieties. The cycle repeats. Each time it begins again, the linguistic frame becomes more detached from the real. The result is a world governed not by people but by terms—a regime of floating signifiers. Every crisis becomes a problem of language. Every conflict becomes a fight over naming. In such a world, even resistance becomes co-opted. To criticise the system, one must use its language, thereby validating its codes. The more pervasive the consensus, the harder it is to imagine alternatives. This is the tyranny not of force, but of vocabulary. The price of participation is agreement with the terms. But meaning cannot be endlessly recycled. At some point, words lose their power. The symbols cease to function. Then, and only then, can something new be said. In the silence that follows the collapse of consensus, there is space to listen again—not to noise, but to the world. Consensus does not arise from conspiracy but from the repeated use of language that slowly distances itself from reality. Consensus arises from the exhaustion of meaning. The cycle begins in trauma and fear, codifies itself in speech, and sustains itself through repetition and ritual. But as words lose their force, as the symbolic order collapses, what remains is not disorder, but the possibility of truth. In that space, free from noise and rhetorical performance, speech might recover its meaning—not as manipulation, but as communion. Conspiracy is consensus—but consensus, too, is only temporary.

The quote 'Why look for conspiracy when stupidity can explain so much?' is widely circulated and often misattributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, Robert J. Hanlon, and Goethe. It is a common paraphrase of a broader idea most closely related to Hanlon's Razor, which states: 'Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity'. It is used to emphasise that systemic failure or absurdity does not require a coordinated plot—just human error, incompetence, or systemic dysfunction. Conspiracy and stupidity, though seemingly opposed, are both forms of collective belief—each offering simplified explanations that bind people into shared narratives. This is the answer to the question 'Why look for conspiracy?'—because both are not just explanations, but languages of consensus, tools through which fractured realities are made coherent, if only for a time.

The manufacture of consent

Who can bear the relentless gaze of the crowd? Power evaporates under total exposure. Invisibility is the cloak of sovereignty, and when stripped away—as when Dorothy’s house crashes into Oz’s illusion—truth dismantles all spectacle. Thus, power must speak before it is

questioned. It fabricates consent through discourse, the first and final line of defence. This is not merely persuasion but the architecture of belief. Ruling classes do not need secret plots; they require ruling ideas—concepts and codes that normalise the very structure of dominance. To preserve authority, they manufacture a consensus so total it becomes invisible. Language is not neutral—it is the operating system of power. From the pulpit to the screen, from print to broadcast to algorithm, the voice of power expands its reach, not by force but by scale. The greater the audience, the less individual resistance. Radio, television, and digital media do not just transmit speech; they amplify a singular frame of reality, blending political persuasion with poetic seduction until the boundaries dissolve. Entertainment becomes news, and news becomes ritual. In this rhythm of information, ideology is no longer a proposal—it is a condition. Consent is no longer granted—it is installed.

At its most refined, language aspires to recreate Eden—a mythical state where every word aligned perfectly with its object. This dream of pure language is reborn in every attempt to discipline speech into doctrine. From the Latin 'docere'—to teach—doctrine embeds itself as belief. Through slogans, declarations, and repeated affirmations, language does not inform but indoctrinates. It teaches what must be seen as good, necessary, and inevitable. Every media campaign, political slogan, or cultural cliché becomes a lesson: not 'this might be true' but 'this must be accepted'. As Jacques Derrida pointed out, the highest form of control is not physical but linguistic. Language installs a centre—a transcendental signified—a foundational truth that organises all other meanings. Whether this centre is God, Reason, Democracy, or Progress, it creates a narrative arc, a cosmic grammar that reassures us of a meaningful order. But this order is rhetorical, not real. It satisfies our longing for coherence, not because it reflects the world, but because it silences our fear of chaos.

Structuralism helped expose the mechanisms behind this control. It rejected simplistic binaries—good/evil, right/wrong—and showed how meaning is constructed through oppositions within systems. Saussure argued that words are not natural signs but arbitrary constructions. The link between a word (signifier) and its meaning (signified) is purely conventional. There is no divine language. After Babel, we lost access to absolute meaning. All that remains is convention—language as a network of relational differences. Meaning is not discovered; it is produced through contrast. Words function only within this web of relations. Language is not a mirror of the world but a grid imposed upon it. Every sentence is an act of shaping reality, not describing it. Meaning arises not from essence but from context. It is not the thing itself but the position a word occupies within the system that determines its value. This system is the deep structure, the abstract code. What we say is only a surface act, a local performance bounded by this underlying order.

Conventions are the infrastructure of understanding. But they are also fragile. From the Latin 'convenire'—to come together—convention implies agreement. Yet what is agreed upon can be just as easily manipulated. Law, religion, literature—all rest on mutable conventions. Those who write the rules reserve the right to break them. Coded language, double meanings, legal fictions, and political euphemisms all point to the same truth: language can be used to clarify or to conceal, to include or exclude, to affirm or betray. Throughout history, speech has been used both to bind and to sever. It promises clarity but delivers confusion. It claims transparency while hiding motive. In times of institutional collapse, when structures lose their grip, the consensus they supported does not vanish—it mutates. It continues to speak, even after it has lost meaning. It sustains itself by sheer momentum, by the ritual repetition of signs long

since emptied of referents. Structuralism, then, does not merely dismantle meaning. It reveals how meaning is never singular, never stable. It is the result of systems—systems that can be shaped, controlled, and rewritten. Language is not a window onto the world. It is scaffolding. It frames what we are allowed to see. It unites when controlled, and sows confusion when it collapses. But in either case, it is never neutral.

The most enduring systems are those that make themselves invisible. When ideology becomes language itself—when the consensus is embedded in how we speak, in what we believe to be obvious—then resistance becomes unintelligible. To oppose the consensus, one must first exit its vocabulary. But how does one speak outside language? That is the dilemma of the dissident. Silence becomes the last refuge. To escape is not necessarily to speak differently but to speak less. Not passive muteness, but deliberate non-participation. A speechlessness that refuses to affirm the given terms of debate. In that silence lies the potential for agency—not to invent new words but to wait for language to become possible again. As Roland Barthes wrote, we fabricate meaning and consensus together. But we also fabricate illusions. And sometimes the only escape is refusal. The structure of language precedes all individual thought. Its architecture is vertical—an invisible system of value and contrast. But our lived speech—is horizontal, diachronic, and syntactic. Every utterance is a performance within a coded world. True poetic language breaks these codes. It plays with them, exposes them, and reconfigures them. Propaganda does the opposite—it uses the system to enforce obedience. Poetry resists; propaganda reinscribes. And yet even poetry is vulnerable. It too circulates within networks of power. Its intelligibility depends on a shared code. A poem that cannot be understood is simply noise. It is not enough to resist. One must resist intelligibly, and that often means re-entering the very system one seeks to reject. Language traps even its critics.

The aphorism of Giambattista Vico—Verum esse ipsum factum—'truth is itself something made'—signals a profound shift in epistemology. Truth is not discovered; it is constructed. Language does not reveal reality—it manufactures it. Constructivism opposes the Cartesian ideal that reason reveals the world. Instead, it argues that we only understand what we ourselves have built. Nature remains alien. It is mechanics—our artificial constructions—that reveal more than nature itself. Vico’s 'ricorso', the cycle of return, suggests that this manufacture is not linear. Languages collapse. Meaning exhausts itself. The tower of Babel rises, crumbles, and rises again. Consensus does not endure through clarity but through repetition, habit, and the exhaustion of alternatives. At some point, people stop believing, but they continue speaking. And then the consensus manufactures itself—an animal agreement not of reason, but of breath. A shared inhalation that precedes speech. An unspoken vow to continue living together, not through dialogue, but through proximity. This is not a rational consensus. It is pre-linguistic consent. Not the result of deliberation but of cohabitation. Neighbours understand more in silence than adversaries do in debate. Words divide. Proximity unites. The consensus at the end of language is not the triumph of truth, but the affirmation of survival. Consensus arises when the conspiracy of language collapses—when meaning is exhausted and the tower of babble falls. What follows is not reasoned agreement, but a conspiracy of silence: an unspoken, animal pact to live and breathe together. More is understood through silent coexistence than through endless speech. 'Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality', said Joseph Conrad. True harmony begins not in dialogue, but in dwelling together as brothers beyond the noise of words. The manufacture of consent begins as a conspiracy of speech and

ends as a consensus of silence. When meaning fails, it is not truth that binds us, but the quiet collective decision to endure and belong together without words.

'If I have ever had these gifts in any sort of living form they have been smothered out of existence a long time ago under a wilderness of words. Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality. I have been for many years a teacher of languages. It is an occupation which at length becomes fatal to whatever share of imagination, observation, and insight an ordinary person may be heir to. To a teacher of languages there comes a time when the world is but a place of many words and man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot'.

— Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes

First Chapter: COMMUNICATION

1. PARADIGMS

1.1. Power and control

(Narratives of domination and architecture of consent)

'The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum'.

— Noam Chomsky, The Common Good

'Power produces knowledge... power and knowledge directly imply one another'.

— Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish

'Communication of power' is the old paradigm of imperial and totalitarian civilisations where communication serves as a tool of domination and surveillance. Ruling ideas are authored by educated elites to preserve order, shape ideology, and legitimise authority. All media channels are instruments of central power, constructing a singular narrative under the illusion of universal truth. It is the paradigm of manufactured consent: one language, one truth, one voice—'ours'. The main goal of the totalitarian language in this paradigm is the manufacture of 'we'- an artificial feeling of unity and a conspicuous form of collective consent. The study of communication developed not as a branch of linguistics or philology but as a tool of political science and sociology, primarily concerned with power, control, and influence. The very term 'communication' came to be understood less as a mutual act of understanding or communion, and more as the strategic transmission of messages to shape opinion and behaviour across populations. Communication has not always been about sharing. In ancient courts and totalitarian states alike, it functioned as a weapon. Messages issued from on high, edicts carved in stone, every word sanctioned by those who ruled. The aim was simple: order, ideology, and authority. Dissidents risked exile; scholars risked silence. Language became a map drawn by dominant classes, marking off who could speak and who must listen. The study of communication shifted focus from understanding to control. It was no longer just the analysis of syntax or meaning but an investigation into how messages are crafted to influence societies. Five core questions emerged: who crafts the message, what is said, through which medium, to whom, and with what effect. These questions broke speech into discrete fields—control of the communicator, analysis of content, study of the medium, understanding of the audience, and

assessment of impact—each tracking how language shapes collective life. Three core functions of societal communication were identified: monitoring the environment to alert to threats and opportunities; interpreting and contextualising signals to coordinate responses; and transmitting shared values and practices across generations. As these analytical tools took hold, a new industry arose around shaping public perception. What had once been a cautionary lesson about manipulated belief became a professional playbook. Propaganda techniques were refined into strategic messaging, emotional appeals, and staged events—presented as essential to guiding opinion in large, complex societies. Consent came to be seen not as an authentic agreement but as something that could be engineered, managed, and measured. At the same time, a deeper critique revealed that language itself is never neutral. Its power depends less on grammar or clarity and more on who wields it and under what circumstances it is received. Competence in communication emerged as a combination of social intuition and institutional backing, not merely correct usage. Educational systems, legal codes, and cultural gatekeepers valorised one form of speech while stigmatising others, creating a symbolic marketplace in which certain voices carried material and social advantages. Those with access to the dominant language accrued symbolic capital like advantages in education, employment, and social standing. At the same time marginalised groups adapted their speech or remained silent. Even as more humanistic approaches called for dialogue and shared meaning, the dominant model continued to treat communication as a one-way transmission. Efficiency, surveillance, and ideological reproduction remained the priority. Research programs aligned with statecraft and market strategy, sidelining the messy give-and-take of everyday conversation in favour of streamlined message delivery. This chapter traces the old paradigm of communication: the intertwining of power and control. It shows how imperial courts and modern regimes alike wielded language to dominate, how the academic framing of communication as a tool of influence replaced earlier notions of communal exchange, and how symbolic power is distributed, regulated, and contested. From carved edicts to televised broadcasts and algorithmic feeds, the story is the same: our language, our narrative, our voice. Yet beneath every broadcast tower and data filter lie hidden fractures. Every dissenting whisper, every underground pamphlet, every encrypted chat reminds us that no script of power can hold unchallenged forever. Can communication ever escape its role as a tool of domination and become a true space for genuine communion?

Lippmann and Dewey: Democracy and communication

In the early twentieth century, Walter Lippmann and John Dewey confronted a central problem of modern democracy: the role of communication in a society shaped by industrial complexity, mass media, and intellectual fragmentation. Their debate unfolded as a conflict between two opposing visions—Lippmann's sceptical technocracy and Dewey's hopeful participatory democracy—each wrestling with the limits of human rationality and the possibilities of public discourse. Lippmann argued that people do not perceive the world directly but through internal representations. These mental filters create a pseudo-environment that distorts judgment, influenced by media simplifications, personal bias, and systemic constraints. Democratic theory, according to Lippmann, naively assumes that individuals are well-informed and capable of rational self-governance. Yet media outlets often reinforce stereotypes and prioritise sensation over truth, driven by commercial pressures rather than public interest. To address this gap, Lippmann proposed delegating the interpretation of complex issues to a specialised class of experts, tasked with generating accurate knowledge for decision-makers. The democratic process, in this vision, becomes one of periodic consultation through elections, rather than continuous public deliberation. The role of science is instrumental—useful for managing society but no longer carrying the salvific aura it once had.

Lippmann, influenced by Nietzsche and Freud accepted the instability of knowledge and the irrational nature of consciousness, which made the dream of a fully rational public illusory. Dewey, in contrast, viewed democracy not as a fixed structure but as an evolving way of life grounded in communication and community. He argued that the public had been eclipsed by industrial forces that disconnected individuals from the consequences of collective action. Yet he maintained that people could reconstruct their public identity through shared experience and communication. For Dewey, the failure of democracy stemmed not from inherent irrationality but from broken channels of communication. While Lippmann separated facts from opinions to protect objectivity, Dewey saw this division as an ideological tool that empowered elites to define truth. For him, the validity of knowledge was not found in abstract standards but in its consequences for those affected. Science, therefore, should not be an autonomous realm above society but an instrument of reflective inquiry rooted in lived experience. Truth was not discovered in isolation but co-created in dialogue. Dewey believed in reforming the press to foster a more informed and participatory public. Journalism, in his model, was not merely a conduit of facts but a facilitator of debate and mutual understanding. Lippmann acknowledged the media's flaws but doubted its reformability; he feared that democracy without guidance would degenerate into irrationality, manipulated by demagogues and propagandists. Their divergence extended to the function of social science. Lippmann, disillusioned by the relativity of knowledge, still valued science for its capacity to reduce social violence through informed administration. Dewey embraced the relativity of truth as a democratic opportunity, challenging who gets to define what counts as knowledge and whose interests it serves. This debate continues to resonate. Lippmann's concern with distortion and elite manipulation remains relevant in an era of disinformation and algorithmic influence. Dewey's insistence on the ethical and communal dimensions of democracy challenges technocratic and media-driven forms of control. Both recognised that communication shapes perception, and thus power, but differed on whether that process could or should be democratised. Lippmann feared that without expert intervention, the public would remain a 'phantom'- incapable of reasoned judgment. Dewey responded that people become capable through the very act of communicating—through shared inquiry, mutual responsibility, and lived participation. The future of any society, in this light, depends not on reducing public voice but on renewing the conditions under which it can speak meaningfully. The tension between expert-led interpretation and participatory dialogue is enduring. How might today's democracies craft communication channels that both inform effectively and empower citizens to co-create their collective future?

Harold D. Lasswell: Function of communication

In his 1948 essay 'The Structure and Function of Communication in Society' Harold D. Lasswell offered one of the earliest comprehensive models for understanding communication in complex societies. His formulation—'Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?'—broke communication into discrete but interdependent components. Rather than treat communication as a passive flow of information, Lasswell identified it as an active process embedded in systems of power, shaped by intention, structure, and outcome. Each of the model's five elements opens a distinct analytical pathway: the communicator corresponds to control analysis, the message to content analysis, the medium to media analysis, the audience to audience analysis, and the effect to impact assessment. This structure provided early communication scholars with a flexible but systematic way of evaluating how messages function in society, and what broader social roles communication serves. Lasswell identified three core societal functions of communication: surveillance, correlation, and cultural transmission. Surveillance involves monitoring the environment and alerting communities to

threats and opportunities. Correlation interprets and contextualises these signals, coordinating responses and maintaining social equilibrium. Cultural transmission ensures the continuity of shared values, knowledge, and social practices over generations. These functions are not just technical—they are mechanisms through which a society reflects on itself, maintains order, and reproduces its norms. Lasswell analogised these functions to the biological operations of an organism: just as sensory and nervous systems gather and respond to information, societies depend on institutions like journalism, education, and diplomacy to absorb, process, and distribute knowledge. These agents operate within communication networks, some symmetrical and reciprocal, others centralised and hierarchical. Big cities operate as global attention nodes, shaping and redistributing information within wider geopolitical systems. Yet mass communication does not unfold in a vacuum. Power, wealth, and prestige affect who speaks, who listens, and whose messages are amplified. Political regimes manipulate communication to serve ideological interests. Media ownership structures privilege certain narratives while marginalising others. The concentration of communicative power distorts public understanding and reinforces social stratification. Lasswell emphasised that understanding communication's role in democracy, requires attention to these underlying asymmetries. Communication systems can fail. Ignorance—whether from lack of access or misinformation—disrupts informed decision-making. Distortion, especially through propaganda or strategic manipulation, misrepresents facts for ideological or commercial gain. Technical limitations, from infrastructural deficits to inefficient media channels, further hinder effective discourse. Lasswell argued that overcoming these breakdowns required both media reform and public enlightenment—what he termed 'equivalent enlightenment', where citizens and leaders share enough mutual understanding to sustain rational governance. In authoritarian contexts, communication often becomes a tool of dominance—surveillance, censorship, and propaganda reinforce state authority while stifling dissent. But even in democratic societies, communication can reproduce inequality unless efforts are made to ensure transparency, access, and accountability. Lasswell believed that communication should serve as a democratic corrective, not simply a mirror of power. Ultimately, Lasswell's work placed communication at the heart of social order. It is a structuring force that reflects, reproduces, and contests the values and institutions of a society. By analysing its structure and functions, one sees that communication is not merely about transfer of information. It is about meaning, legitimacy, and the ongoing negotiation of collective life in an era of concentrated media power and algorithmic curation. How can we ensure that communication's roles in surveillance, correlation, and cultural transmission genuinely support democratic engagement rather than undermine it?

Walter Lippmann: Defense of civility

In 'Essays in the Public Philosophy' (1955), Walter Lippmann presents a defence of civility grounded in the revival of a shared moral order. He begins by restating the foundation of social life: the 'public philosophy'. This tradition, developed over centuries, asserts that liberty, law, and reason must guide both governors and the governed. These principles, he argues, have historically upheld free institutions by affirming that no one is above the law, and that rational discourse should inform collective life, not emotional impulse. Lippmann warns that modern democracies have grown detached from this foundation. Liberal democracy, he contends, has become directionless in the absence of a coherent civic ethos. In place of shared convictions, societies face ideological confusion. The rise of authoritarian systems, unified by conviction and purpose, contrasts sharply with democracies that lack resolve and clarity. For democracy to endure, its legitimacy must rest on something deeper than procedural formality—it must be rooted in belief. Reviving the shared ethical tradition, according to Lippmann, is both

necessary and possible. He insists that when applied to issues like sovereignty, property, education, and speech, the shared philosophy provides coherence and rational guidance. However, the challenge lies in adapting ancient principles—formed before mass societies and industrial modernity—to the complexities of contemporary life. Without this adaptation, democratic societies risk being overtaken by movements that exploit their moral vacuum. A central obstacle to this revival is the difficulty of communicating the guiding philosophy in an age dominated by positivism. The modern worldview trusts only what is measurable and empirical. Concepts like justice, truth, and obligation appear irrelevant or unreal. The public philosophy demands loyalty to intangible ideals, yet modern minds resist what cannot be observed or quantified. Abstract principles seem distant from daily experience. Lippmann observes that throughout history, societies have responded by materialising ethical ideals. These are transformed into visible, symbolic forms. Gods, laws, and constitutions have served to embody higher truths, making them intelligible and authoritative. Constitutional systems, for instance, give form to invisible obligations. They translate the moral necessity of order into lived political structures, binding individuals together under a common framework. Still, this accommodation has limits. The materialisation of ideals cannot resolve irreconcilable value conflicts. Civility is not mere tolerance but a shared commitment to transcendent principles. Historically, this commitment found expression in the doctrine of natural law—an order believed to bind rulers and citizens alike. Whether expressed in divine or rational terms, it offered a universal reference point. Lippmann sees the rejection of such a foundation as the root of modern crisis. Thinkers like Nietzsche and Sartre, by denying objective truths, replaced shared values with personal will. Ethics became subjective, and civility lost its anchor. Without assent in a common reality, politics devolves into a battle of competing private meanings. The result is intellectual anarchy and democratic disintegration. For Lippmann, the responsibility falls on philosophers—the 'teachers of teachers'—to guide public thought. By abandoning relativism and reaffirming rational inquiry, philosophers can help restore public confidence in universal principles. They cannot rule, but they can provide the vision that sustains rule. The core problem is legitimacy. Philosophers must be the ones to 'manufacture consent', not the journalists. Democracies cannot survive without faith in a real and objective moral world. Lippmann ends with a call to recover what he calls the 'mandate of heaven'—a conviction that justice and reason are not illusions but part of the natural order. Without this conviction, democratic societies lack the will to resist tyranny and fragmentation. The defence of civility, then, is ultimately a defence of the existence of truth. Can contemporary democracies rediscover a shared foundation strong enough to uphold civility in an age that prizes only what can be measured?

Edward L. Bernays: Crystallised public opinion

In 'Semantic Tyranny: How Edward L. Bernays Stole Walter Lippmann's Mojo and Got Away With It[106]' (2013) Sue Curry Jansen claims that Edward L. Bernays, often celebrated as the 'father of public relations', built an empire of persuasion by twisting the ideas of Walter Lippmann, one of the most thoughtful critics of propaganda in democratic life. In 'Public Opinion' (1922), Lippmann warned against the dangers of media manipulation and the fabrication of collective beliefs. He viewed the 'manufacture of consent' as admission that

[106] Jansen, S.C. (2025). Semantic Tyranny: How Edward L. Bernays Stole Walter Lippmann's Mojo and Got Away With It and Why It Still Matters. International Journal of Communication, [online] 7(0), p.18. Available at: https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1955 [Accessed 31 Jul. 2025].

people form opinions based on distorted symbols, not reality. Bernays, in 'Crystallising Public Opinion' (1923), turned this critique into justification, claiming Lippmann as a theoretical ally in the development of public relations as a strategic industry. This misappropriation was not an accidental misreading but what Sue Curry Jansen calls 'semantic tyranny'. Bernays rebranded Lippmann's critique of political distortion as an endorsement. Where Lippmann saw cognitive limitation, Bernays saw a market opportunity. Through selective citation and contextual erasure, he portrayed Lippmann's scepticism about the role of press agents and image-makers as support for their necessary function in modern society. According to Bernays, manipulating symbols and crafting public perception were not dangers to be avoided but tools to be perfected. Propaganda became a science, and Lippmann—wrongly—became its intellectual patron. Bernays' sleight of hand was effective and enduring. By cloaking public relations in the language of democratic facilitation, he gave it a moral and intellectual veneer. His later essay, 'The Engineering of Consent', formalised this worldview. Bernays described persuasion as a natural extension of free speech, reframing propaganda as responsible leadership in a mass democracy. According to him, modern media created a fragmented public consciousness, and only trained experts could manage its coherence through careful messaging, symbolic events, and emotional appeals. Lippmann, however, had aimed for the opposite. He called for institutional reforms, objective knowledge systems, and a more reflective public sphere. He did not dismiss the masses but questioned whether unfiltered public opinion could function as the foundation of policy in a media-dominated environment. For him, the answer lay in improving the conditions for judgment, not exploiting their deficiencies. Bernays converted this anxiety into a professional playbook. But Lippmann never embraced propaganda as a solution; he saw it as a structural flaw in mass communication. Bernays' version of public relations became a model for controlling public consciousness, while Lippmann's work remains a warning about that very control. One endorsed symbolic engineering as democratic maintenance; the other feared that such tactics undermined the very meaning of civic choice. To overcome the semantic tyranny and restore public transparency, Lippmann must be recognised not as the architect of modern propaganda but as its critic. The fight over public opinion is not just about techniques—it is about truth, ethics, and the legitimacy of influence in an age of semantic conquest. In a world where propaganda is dressed up as public service, can we reclaim the true spirit of democratic discourse? Who will dare to resist the semantic tyranny that turns citizens into consumers of engineered consent?

James W. Carey: Communication as culture

James W. Carey's cultural approach to communication begins with a modest yet profound observation from John Dewey: 'Of all things communication is the most wonderful'. In 'Communication as Culture[107]' Carey uses this remark not as a rhetorical flourish, but as a gateway into a deeper understanding of communication—not simply as the transmission of messages, but as the fabric of shared life. For Carey, communication is how societies exist, sustain themselves, and create meaning. It is not just something that happens in culture. Communication is culture and language is we. Carey distinguishes between two fundamental models of discourse that have shaped Western thought. The 'transmission view' understands symbolic exchange primarily as the sending of information across distances for control and influence. This model, rooted in religious and colonial histories, persists today in political

[107] Carey, J.W. (2008). Communication as Culture, Revised Edition. Routledge.

campaigns, education systems, and media industries. It treats communication like transportation: efficient, linear, and outcome-driven. Whether in the form of telegraphs or social media, the goal remains the same—movement of information toward specific ends. The 'ritual view', in contrast, sees communication as a process of maintaining society through participation. Its roots are found in older religious practices—ceremonies, storytelling, and collective rites—where meaning is not transmitted but enacted and renewed. From this perspective, reading the daily newspaper is less about gaining new information and more about participating in a cultural ritual that reaffirms common values and binds people into a community. It dramatises the world, reinforcing a sense of order, belonging, and symbolic coherence. Carey argues that Dewey's philosophy holds both views in tension, but ultimately affirms the ritual model as more foundational. Dewey saw communication not as the mere exchange of data but as the creation of a shared world. Carey takes this insight further by proposing a definition of communication as a symbolic process through which reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed. In other words, communication is how people make a world together. Reality, for Carey, is not fixed or external—it is a construct shaped by symbols. Language, maps, rituals, and stories are not just representations of reality; they are tools for shaping and sharing it. A map does more than reflect geography—it influences how space is imagined and traversed by whoever can read the map. Similarly, public discourse does not simply report facts; it generates frameworks for interpreting those facts. Communication builds the scaffolding of common sense inside an interpretive community. This symbolic world is always in flux. As generations shift and conditions change, symbols must be maintained, adapted, or reinvented. Carey sees communication as the ongoing work of cultural repair, a process of making meaning amid disorientation and uncertainty. Thought itself, he insists, is social and public, not private. People think with mutual symbols, and their understanding of the world depends on collective representation. Studies, then, should not merely analyze how messages are delivered but examine how reality is constructed through cultural forms—art, religion, science, journalism—and how technologies mediate and reshape these forms. Models of communication are never neutral. The dominance of the transmission model has shaped societies around control, efficiency, and hierarchy. It has also narrowed education, urban design, and technological innovation to serve institutional power rather than cultural connection. Carey calls for a reorientation of theory—away from control and toward communion. By recovering the ritual view, scholars and citizens alike can begin to rebuild public life through practices that foster communal meaning and social imagination. Communication, in this sense, becomes a form of cultural stewardship, preserving the symbolic worlds people inhabit while making space for renewal and transformation. Can we shift from a transmission model of efficiency and control toward a ritual understanding of communication?

Pierre Bourdieu: The symbolic power of language

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of language challenges the illusion that words derive their power from internal structure or semantic clarity. In 'Language and Symbolic Power', he argues that language is not an autonomous system of signs but a social practice embedded in power relations. Its effectiveness and legitimacy depend less on grammar than on who is speaking, in what context, and under what conditions of recognition and authority. Language, for Bourdieu, is never neutral; it is always a medium of symbolic struggle. Bourdieu critiques the legacy of structural linguistics, particularly its tendency to isolate language from its social environment. Inspired by Saussure, structuralism reduced language to an internal system, bracketing out historical, political, and social forces. This abstraction lent linguistic analysis an aura of scientific purity but concealed the power dynamics that shape linguistic practice. Saussure's

own recognition of language's 'social nature' was largely ignored by followers who favoured formalism over context. To restore the social dimension of language, Bourdieu introduces the concept of the 'linguistic market'. Just as economic value depends on context and demand, so too does the value of speech depend on the social setting in which it is uttered. An utterance carries weight not simply because of what it says but because of who says it, to whom, and with what institutional backing. Language is not merely a code to be decoded; it is a field of symbolic exchanges, governed by inequalities in access, recognition, and legitimacy. The speaker's capacity to speak—what Bourdieu calls 'linguistic habitus'—is shaped by their position within social structures. Competence involves more than grammatical correctness; it includes the social intuition to speak appropriately in context. This competence is unequally distributed, shaped by class, education, and socialisation. Institutions such as schools help reproduce this inequality by teaching and valorising the dominant language while stigmatising regional dialects or non-standard speech. The result is symbolic domination: those who control legitimate language exercise power without needing overt coercion, since dominated groups often internalise their own marginalisation and adapt their speech accordingly. Linguistic capital functions like economic capital, yielding advantages in social interactions, education, and employment. The recognition of 'proper' language carries material and symbolic rewards, reinforcing the hierarchy of linguistic forms. Literary institutions, grammarians, and bureaucrats codify and preserve the dominant language, shaping not only how people speak but how they think and understand their place in society. Even the distinction between 'style' and 'error' reflects this dynamic, as stylistic appreciation depends on the audience's training and recognition. Language's polysemy—its capacity to carry multiple meanings—makes it a potent tool for ideological manipulation. Political and religious discourses often use familiar words to bridge social divides or mask deep antagonisms. In revolutionary moments, words may flip in meaning, exposing language as a site of struggle. The more unified the linguistic market becomes, the more intense the contest over meaning. Ritual and legal discourse reveal language's performative power. When uttered under the right conditions by an authorised speaker, language can create social realities—marriages, laws, verdicts—through words alone. However, this dominance depends on institutional structures and collective belief. The same sentence uttered without authority falls flat. Bourdieu thus expands J.L. Austin's notion of the performative: the success of performative language hinges on recognition, institutional delegation, and audience complicity. The illusion of linguistic equality—promoted by ideals of language as a communal treasure—conceals the structures that produce and legitimise dominant forms. Educational and political institutions reinforce a standardised language, marginalising others and shaping perceptions of correctness and intelligence. This codification of language serves bureaucratic needs and sustains the symbolic authority of the state. Naming is the most explicit form of symbolic power. The act of classification—assigning names, titles, or roles—is never neutral. It organises the social world and legitimises certain perceptions while excluding others. This extends from academic titles to everyday insults, all functioning to institutionalise identities. Official naming wields durable symbolic efficacy because it is collectively recognised and often internalised by those it defines. Bourdieu's analysis reveals language as a central instrument of symbolic domination. To study language sociologically is to illuminate how power moves through words, names, accents, and silences. The legitimacy of speech is not given—it is produced, policed, and perpetuated through social rituals, educational systems, and political authority. Recognising this dynamic is essential for any critique of ideology, culture, or communication. Language, far from a transparent medium, is the battlefield where social distinctions are made, unmade, and remade. It is a field of symbolic

struggle governed by social recognition and institutional backing. How might we contest and redistribute this power to create a more equitable linguistic landscape?

Manuel Castells: Networks of language and power

In 'Communication Power[108]' (2009), Manuel Castells argues that communication constructs meaning, structures our perception of reality, and serves as a fundamental source of power. It is not merely an exchange of information but a material process rooted in the mind, where neural patterns form mental images in response to bodily states, learnt associations, and environmental stimuli. Consciousness emerges when these images align with one's sense of self, allowing for directed attention and coherence. Meaning is not passively received from the world but actively constructed within the mind. This construction involves organising experience through symbolic representation. People rely on metaphors, grounded in bodily experience, to transform internal representations into language. Language then structures attention, encodes values, and guides behaviour. It extends the inner life into a shared domain, forming culture and shaping perception. Emotional responses help focus exchange by linking memories with signals that prioritise relevance and action. Mirror neurons reveal the inherently social nature of communication. These neurons enable individuals to simulate and understand others' actions and feelings, forming the neurological basis of empathy, cooperation, and symbolic interaction. Through shared representations, humans coordinate behaviour, imitate, and generate abstract concepts. Discourse thus becomes a framing mechanism that shapes how reality is perceived, filtered, and interpreted. Framing selects and emphasises aspects of reality while excluding others. Media, institutions, and individuals use frames to influence understanding and decision-making. Agenda-setting and priming reinforce this by determining what is noticed and how it is evaluated. Framing operates through resonance with existing cognitive patterns, embedding external narratives into internal mental structures. Media systems function as gatekeepers and programmers of these narratives. Power is exercised not only through coercion but through control over the production and distribution of meaning. According to Manuel Castells, the network society is defined by the capacity to shape meaning through mass media that allow individuals to produce and share their own messages. Wars illustrated how strategic framing can realign public perception. The phrase 'war on terror' became a linguistic weapon, channelling emotions, shaping beliefs, and manufacturing political support. Control over language shaped reality itself. Even physical violence required prior justification through a dominant frame. Meaning, in this sense, precedes action. In cases where institutions lose credibility due to corruption or systemic failure, communication frames unravel, exposing the fragility of authority. Global conflicts rooted in ethnicity, religion, or nationalism are not simply struggles over resources but battles over symbolic meaning. Language, imagery, and ritual become weapons of political violence, reshaping collective consciousness through spectacle and fear. Networks do not generate dominance on their own. It is those who design, program, and frame communication who shape public discourse. As digital platforms weaken centralised control, discourse becomes more open but also more vulnerable to market pressures and surveillance. Power today lies in programming meaning. Counterpower emerges through reprogramming—creating new frames, metaphors, and narratives. Social movements and independent creators use language to challenge dominant networks and circulate alternative interpretations. These efforts constitute internal rewiring, a struggle not for control over bodies, but for control over signs and symbols. Communication intersects with politics, economics, and culture, forming interlocking meta-networks. Power is

[108]Castells, M. (2009). Communication Power. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

amplified through switching—aligning various systems for mutual benefit. Media moguls exemplify this ability to connect media, finance, and politics into a single apparatus. Resistance, in turn, requires building autonomous spaces, where meaning can be renegotiated beyond elite control. In the network society, communication is the main architecture of power. Whoever defines the symbols defines the future. By understanding how networks shape meaning, individuals can reclaim agency, contest domination, and construct more just and plural realities. In the networked age, meaning flows through channels shaped and programmed by those who frame it. Encoding power into every symbol and slogan can fracture frames, through grassroots storytelling or collective outrage. The very networks are transformed into battlegrounds for resistance to decide who ultimately defines shared realities.

1.2. Deception and manipulation

(Networks of influence: Deception in mass communication)

'Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state'.

— Noam Chomsky, Media Control

'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society'.

— Edward Bernays, Propaganda

'Communication of deception' is the paradigm that emerges after the fall of monarchies with the rise of democracies, where people are expected to speak through elected officials and public opinion. The language of freedom hides the machinery of influence—free speech becomes a battlefield of contradictions. Media no longer manufactures consent but dissent, fostering fragmentation, conflict, and the illusion of choice. It is the era of linguistic civil war—where every word claims freedom but serves power. If deception is always possible in language, then the current paradigm of mass communication—built on the transmission of information, persuasion, and influence—stands on fragile ground. Language, long trusted as a vehicle for clarity and reason, proves equally adept at concealing, distorting, and misleading. In politics, media, and public discourse, the ability to manipulate through speech has become a measure of success, transforming communication into a tool of control rather than understanding. This paradigm reduces language to strategy, where truth is secondary to effectiveness. But when deception becomes endemic, meaning dissolves, and trust collapses. If every utterance can hide a lie, the foundation of communication erodes. A new paradigm must emerge, not based on the mechanics of influence but on ethical commitments—responsibility, honesty, and trust. Such a shift moves communication from domination toward communion, from spectacle toward dialogue. The future of speech depends less on linguistic sophistication or technological scale and more on the moral quality of human presence. Without ethical anchoring, language ceases to be a shared world; it becomes a battlefield of illusions. Only by reimagining communication as a moral relation rather than a technical act can people hope to restore the possibility of genuine understanding. In historical terms, democratic discourse assumed that open debate and a free press would immunise public opinion against falsehood. In practice, however, the proliferation of print, broadcast, and online channels has lowered barriers to entry for actors who wield deception as a strategic weapon. Propaganda techniques once limited to state

intelligence services are now available to corporate interests, political campaigns, and technological intermediaries. This convergence underscores the urgency of revisiting classical models—Lasswell's actor-message-channel-audience-effect schema and Shannon–Weaver's noise concept—to comprehend how intentional distortions propagate through increasingly complex media ecologies. Technological affordances compound these challenges. Algorithmic recommendation systems prioritise engagement, rewarding sensational or emotionally charged content over sober analysis. Deepfakes and AI-driven text generators produce high-fidelity simulacra of speech and image, erasing easy distinctions between fact and fabrication. Social platforms, designed to optimise virality, enable echo chambers that insulate audiences from corrective feedback. In such environments, strategic omissions, selective framing, and rhetorical amplification become more potent than outright lies, since they exploit cognitive biases and social bonds. Audience agency remains central. Individuals seek content that affirms identity, values, and emotions—uses-and-gratifications theory in action. Opinion leaders and micro-influencers further bridge the gap between mass channels and personal networks, lending deceptive messages the trust of interpersonal endorsement. The result is a self-reinforcing loop: tailored deceptions reach receptive nodes, gain traction through social proof, and then feed back into larger broadcast systems as 'organic' trends, obscuring the origins of manipulation. Confronting this endemic deception requires more than fact-checking or regulatory mandates. Ethical recalibration must occur at every level: platform architects must design for transparency and verifiability; educational systems must cultivate reflexive media literacy; public institutions must model accountability and restorative practices. Dialogic forums, collective truth commissions, and deliberative assemblies offer blueprints for reestablishing shared factual ground and rebuilding communal trust. By anchoring communication in moral presence and mutual recognition, it becomes possible to transcend the current paradigm of strategic deceit. Language's capacity to connect, illuminate, and empower should be recovered.

Deception of communication

Deception offers a critical framework for understanding how falsehoods shape perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours in the digital media environment. As a concept, it bridges disinformation (intentional lies), misinformation (unintentional inaccuracies), and misperceptions (false beliefs), showing how intent, strategy, and reception interact. By moving beyond content analysis to examine how falsehoods are produced, circulated, and adopted, deception theory connects the relational structures of communication with broader systems of control. Defined as the intentional act of misleading to achieve specific goals, deception is not merely about content but about manipulation of context. It exploits the structure of media systems—algorithmic amplification, platform design, and institutional ownership—to distort reality. Whether through selective omission, repetition, or emotional framing, deceptive communication reshapes public discourse. Unlike isolated errors, it is systemic, relational, and strategic. It thrives where cognitive bias meets technological affordance, manipulating not only what is believed but how belief itself functions. Lasswell's five-point communication model—Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect—remains directly relevant. Deception aligns each element: the actor (intentional deceiver), the message (crafted distortion), the channel (optimised for spread), the audience (primed by bias), and the effect (altered perception and behaviour). Lasswell's early analysis of propaganda already positioned communication as an instrument of elite manipulation, a perspective revived in today's studies of viral disinformation. Shannon and Weaver's model adds a technical layer: deception acts as noise, disrupting transmission and increasing entropy. Feedback loops—likes, shares, clicks—do not correct this distortion but often reinforce it, creating a recursive, self-validating system

of misinformation. Agenda-setting theory, explains how deceptive actors flood discourse to shape attention and define reality. Priming and framing effects are intensified by hybrid media systems, where traditional and digital platforms merge to sustain narratives. Audiences, influenced by uses and gratifications theory, seek media that affirms identity, making them vulnerable to deception that satisfies emotional needs—belonging, fear, anger. Selective exposure further isolates them in echo chambers, increasing polarisation. Critical theorists anticipated the manipulation of consciousness by media industries. Their insights into commodification and ideological control find new relevance in digital deception. The two-step flow model adds another layer: influence spreads through opinion leaders who carry deceptive content into social networks, using trust to override fact. Modern deceivers—bots, influencers, and political actors—capitalise on these dynamics, creating relational proximity that substitutes for truth. Deception is more than a symptom; it is an operating logic in a communication system built for manipulation. By unifying classical theory with contemporary dynamics, it reveals how misinformation is not merely a breakdown of communication, but its strategic redesign. Studying deception illuminates the shifting architecture of belief in an era where communication is both weapon and terrain. How might our understanding of deception change if we began to see every message not just as information, but as a potential strategic manoeuvre? What questions would we then ask about the ethics, accountability, and design of the very systems through which we communicate?

Faulty logic and fallacy of speech

The fallacy of speech arises when arguments appear persuasive on the surface but are underpinned by faulty reasoning, linguistic confusion, or intentional manipulation. A fallacy distorts the logical structure or content of an argument, making it unsound even if its premises seem valid. While such errors can emerge innocently from ignorance or cognitive bias, they are often employed strategically to persuade, deceive, or distract. Aristotle's early systematisation of fallacies in 'On Sophistical Refutations' defined them as flawed modes of argument that pretend to establish truth but fail under scrutiny. These patterns remain deeply embedded in both informal discussions and formal rhetorical exchanges, particularly in mass communication and public discourse. Fallacies are generally classified as either formal or informal. Formal fallacies concern the internal structure of an argument—errors in deductive logic that invalidate conclusions regardless of the truth of their premises. Informal fallacies, on the other hand, arise from the misuse of content, language, or context. These include ambiguities, irrelevant arguments, and flawed evidence. The distinction highlights how a speaker may argue in a logically valid form yet employ misleading content, or vice versa. More contemporary models, such as the pragma-dialectical approach, analyze fallacies as violations of fair dialogue. Here, the fallacy is not just a breach of logic but of cooperative communicative norms. This view emphasises the social function of argumentation and the importance of sincerity and reasonableness in disagreement. Common informal fallacies illustrate how persuasive language can easily mask faulty logic. The 'post hoc' fallacy falsely infers causation from mere succession in time. The 'slippery slope' suggests that a small step will lead to extreme outcomes without adequate evidence. The 'straw man' distorts an opponent's view to simplify refutation. The 'false analogy' equates dissimilar cases. The 'argument from silence' draws conclusions from a lack of evidence rather than its presence. More recent critiques include measurement fallacies, such as overinterpreting quantitative metrics—treating data as proxies for value without acknowledging their limitations. In academic contexts, this leads to overreliance on indicators like journal rankings or citation counts, despite their questionable epistemic significance. Intentional fallacies—such as red herrings, ad hominem attacks, or false dilemmas—are

commonly employed in political and media rhetoric. They often succeed because they appeal to emotion, identity, or group affiliation, exploiting social biases more than logical clarity. Humor and irony can use fallacies playfully, but in domains of trust—like education, science, or governance—such tactics corrode credibility. The fallacy of speech thus represents not only a philosophical and logical problem but also a moral and political one. Understanding these flawed reasoning patterns enables people to resist manipulation, engage in more sincere dialogue, and defend the fragile structures of truth that underpin public discourse. How might a culture of dialogue in which participants not only recognise and call out fallacies, but also commit to the shared norms of sincerity, reasonableness, and intellectual humility?

Language of misinformation

The language of misinformation operates not through silence, but through noise—an overwhelming hum of half-truths, selective facts, and emotionally charged distortions. Unlike disinformation, which is crafted to deceive with intent, misinformation spreads as a byproduct of error, belief, or bias. It may originate from honest misunderstanding or careless reporting, but its effects are rarely benign. It circulates through speech, text, and image, absorbing the authority of language while undermining its capacity to convey truth. In political campaigns, medical debates, and digital culture, the subtle rhetoric of misinformation reshapes perceptions without necessarily lying outright. It manipulates emphasis, omits context, and reorders fragments of reality to create plausible illusions. Language, here, is not used to clarify or 'to commune with' but to confuse, assert, or persuade. Misinformation has always depended on language's weaknesses: its ambiguity, flexibility, and reliance on interpretation. Ancient examples like the Great Moon Hoax of 1835 reveal that falsehood thrives not only through invention but through style—how language dramatises, mythologises, and cloaks speculation in the appearance of fact. Modern misinformation accelerates this process. With each new medium—print, broadcast, internet—misinformation acquires new dialects: the language of the viral tweet, the infographic, the clickbait headline, the captioned image. These modes strip language of nuance while heightening its emotional and persuasive power. Speech becomes an instrument of distortion when speakers exploit the trust embedded in shared language. The familiar idioms of authority—scientific terms, political slogans, statistical references—are adopted to imply credibility. Falsehood then parades in borrowed form. The mechanisms of communication amplify rather than restrain this dynamic. Algorithms favour viral phrasing, repetition, and confirmation of tribal identity. Emotionally resonant phrasing—anger, fear, certainty—outpaces cautious qualification or ambiguity. In such an environment, misinformation is not merely tolerated; it is rewarded. Attempts to counter misinformation often rely on the same medium that spreads it—language. Fact-checking, clarification, and media literacy are efforts to restore semantic stability. Yet correction struggles against momentum. Language, once shaped into narrative, resists revision. A false phrase embedded in memory becomes a permanent trace, however inaccurate. Speech creates belief not only by asserting but by repeating. Corrections, even when accurate, often lack the stylistic power of the initial misinformation. The rhythm of speech matters more than the logic of rebuttal. Artificial intelligence introduces new forms of synthetic speech, capable of mimicking human tone and producing endless plausible falsehoods. Deepfakes and text generators can mass-produce misinformation in the idiom of truth. Yet AI also provides tools for detection—scrutinising patterns, tracing origins, and filtering content. The paradox is that the same system that degrades speech may help rescue it. Misinformation exploits the communicative function of language while betraying its ethical one. It converts language from a space of dialogue into a mechanism of influence. The challenge is not merely to correct false statements but to reform how speech

is trusted, circulated, and anchored to reality. In this context, the ethics of language—precision, transparency, humility—become tools of resistance. Language, long abused as a weapon of confusion, must again serve its older role: communion, not command. Which ethical commitments and practical interventions—grounded in precision, transparency, and humility—could restore language's role as communion rather than command?

Strategies of disinformation

Disinformation is the deliberate use of false or distorted information to deceive, confuse, or manipulate public perception in the service of political, military, or commercial interests. It does not merely involve spreading lies, but often incorporates fragments of truth, manipulated context, or rhetorical exaggeration. Unlike misinformation, which arises through error, disinformation is intentional, calculated, and often part of coordinated campaigns designed to destabilise trust, inflame identity conflicts, or demobilise civic participation. As a linguistic strategy, disinformation weaponises communication by transforming language from a medium of understanding into a tool of control and confusion. The modern understanding of disinformation draws from Cold War-era intelligence operations. The Russian term 'dezinformatsiya'—popularised by Soviet intelligence services—described strategic media efforts to mislead foreign populations. This history shaped the concept's current use in digital information warfare. Today, disinformation operates through digital channels: falsehoods seeded by bots, algorithmic amplification of divisive narratives, and fabricated content designed to appear legitimate. The core strategy involves seeding false or partial information and relying on social networks to echo it through emotionally aligned audiences who accept it as authentic and personally meaningful. Studies classify disinformation alongside misinformation and malinformation. Disinformation specifically refers to harmful falsehoods spread with intent. Analysts describe an 'ABC' framework for understanding disinformation campaigns: Actors (state or non-state), Behaviours (covert dissemination, identity concealment), and Content (fabricated stories, manipulated images). Scholars also identify seeding and echoing as the two dominant dynamics: initial dissemination through strategic planting, followed by audience amplification as beliefs, opinions, or ideological affirmations. Social media ecosystems, with their feedback loops and algorithmic visibility, make such echoing not only possible but inevitable. Disinformation differs from propaganda in scope and intent. While propaganda seeks to promote an ideology or mobilise belief, disinformation often aims to erode belief altogether. Its goal is not necessarily persuasion, but destabilisation—of truth, authority, and mutual understanding. It breeds cynicism, distrust, and disengagement by overwhelming people with conflicting messages, false equivalencies, and polarising narratives. This strategy fragments consensus and paralyses action, particularly in democratic societies dependent on informed public discourse. Various governments and corporate actors have used disinformation for their own purposes. From 'active measures' to contemporary online manipulation campaigns, disinformation has shifted from analogue tactics like forged documents and whisper campaigns to digital tools like deepfakes and algorithmic misinformation. These strategies often target cultural and political fault lines—such as race, immigration, or health—to create chaos and doubt. Research increasingly suggests that even small-scale operations, when timed precisely and amplified effectively, can distort electoral outcomes, damage public health responses, or deepen social polarisation. Addressing disinformation cannot rely solely on fact-checking or platform moderation. Its persistence reveals deeper political and cultural vulnerabilities. The language of disinformation thrives where trust is weak, authority is contested, and meaning is fragile. Combating it requires more than detecting lies—it demands exposing the economic and strategic incentives behind deceptive media practices.

Disinformation is not just an informational error—it is a weaponised language strategy that exploits the structures of communication itself. What measures could illuminate and disrupt disinformation campaigns' actors, behaviours, and echoing dynamics? What will happen if we start exposing strategic incentives, breaking amplification loops, and rebuilding trust in public discourse?

Systematically distorted communication

Jürgen Habermas's theory of systematically distorted communication[109] addresses the structural and psychological obstacles that prevent genuine understanding in human interaction. Rooted in his broader project of communicative rationality, Habermas argues that undistorted communication—where speakers engage freely, equally, and openly—is rarely achieved in practice. Instead, much of everyday speech is marked by hidden constraints, unconscious influences, and ideological structures that produce pseudocommunication: the illusion of consensus masking deep misunderstanding. These distortions are not just mistakes or intentional lies but are embedded in how people think, speak, and relate, making them both pervasive and invisible. Drawing from psychoanalysis, especially Freud, Habermas contends that early emotional conflicts shape linguistic and symbolic capacities, giving rise to internalised distortions that persist into adulthood. These appear in language as what Freud called 'paleosymbols'—pre-linguistic, emotionally charged symbols that escape conventional grammar. They disrupt clarity by injecting ambiguity, rigidity, or personal meaning into public language. At the social level, ideology functions similarly, shaping entire discourses to serve dominant power structures, thereby naturalising inequality, and suppressing critique. Habermas identifies three levels where these distortions operate. At the linguistic level, speech violates shared rules, making comprehension difficult. At the behavioural level, communication becomes compulsive or stereotyped, revealing unconscious emotional residues. At the systemic level, a disjunction arises between speech, gesture, and intention—what is said does not match what is meant or felt. These phenomena are not isolated errors but signs of a deeper pathology, rooted in unresolved developmental or societal tensions. To address these distortions, Habermas turns to psychoanalysis as a model of semantic reconstruction. Therapy provides a dialogic setting where repressed content can be brought into language through reflection and narrative. In the transference relationship, the patient unknowingly reenacts past conflicts with the analyst, who helps decode and re-symbolise these paleosymbols into publicly comprehensible speech. This process restores the communicative function of language and reestablishes the possibility of understanding—at the individual level through personal healing, and potentially at the societal level through critical discourse. Systematically distorted communication is more than a clinical or psychological problem; it is also a political and institutional one. Habermas links distorted communication to structural inequalities—ideologies that dominate language, media, and public discourse. Examples include Nazi propaganda, which systematically reshaped German language to support mass violence, or sexist language, which reflects and reinforces gender hierarchies through grammatical norms and cultural metaphors. In these cases, distortion is not individual pathology but collective normalisation of asymmetry and exclusion. For Habermas, critique is essential to overcoming such distortions. Unlike manipulation, which is deliberate, systematic distortion relies on self-deception—people believe they are communicating transparently while unknowingly reproducing hidden interests or traumas. Critique, when rooted in rational dialogue and minimal truth claims, can expose these

[109] Habermas, J. (1970). On systematically distorted communication. Inquiry, 13(1–4), 205–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747008601590

unconscious forces. Yet critique alone is insufficient. Emancipation demands institutional change, public deliberation, and ethical commitment. It requires not only rational analysis but emotional and moral engagement with the consequences of distortion. In the modern public sphere, phenomena like filter bubbles, echo chambers, and algorithmic manipulation represent contemporary forms of systematically distorted communication. These digital structures foster fragmentation, reinforce ideological insulation, and hinder shared understanding. Yet they also highlight the enduring relevance of Habermas's theory: the crisis of communication reflects not the end of dialogue but the need to renew its foundational conditions. Social media, while amplifying distortion, can also host 'counterpublics' and emancipatory resymbolisation, depending on how speech norms and platforms are structured. Habermas insists that normal communication depends on shared linguistic rules, reflexivity, and a commitment to mutual understanding. When these conditions break down—through repressed conflicts, ideological coercion, or systemic inequality—language loses its democratic potential. The task of psychoanalysis, critical theory, and political action is to restore that potential by reconnecting language with truth, experience, and ethical responsibility. Ultimately, systematically distorted communication is a symptom of deeper human and societal divisions. It obscures understanding by inserting unconscious or ideological content into public language. Overcoming it requires a blend of semantic analysis, self-reflection, and collective critique. Habermas's model remains one of the most ambitious attempts to unify psychoanalysis, linguistics, and social theory into a project of human emancipation through language. Which practices or institutional changes could implement semantic reconstruction and critical dialogue to effectively resist systemic distortions in public discourse?

Transmission or association?

The dominant conception of communication often reduces it to a matter of transmission—an efficient and measurable transport of information. This view, rooted in engineering and information theory, treats communication as a process of sending messages from a sender to a receiver through a medium. The success of communication, in this paradigm, is evaluated by how much and how accurately information is transferred. Communication becomes a mechanism—quantifiable, scalable, and technologically adaptable. It serves the interests of mass media, governments, and global corporations who seek to maximise reach, repetition, and clarity. In this model, the message and its medium dominate: language is instrumentalised, and meaning is determined by the quantity and spread of data. In contrast, another tradition views communication not as transmission but as communion. This paradigm emphasises association, connection, and shared presence. Rather than focusing on the message, it centres on the human act of coming together—of joining in meaning and experience. Here, language is not the final product but only a tool, sometimes even a distraction. The essence of communication lies not in information exchange but in mutual presence and trust. It is not measured by scale or speed but by the quality of attention and honesty among participants. This view aligns with the original etymology of communication from the Latin 'communicatio', meaning to make common, to share, or to participate in something together. This divergence creates two competing visions of human interaction. The first, the transmission paradigm, assumes that humans are essentially language-using animals whose primary goal is to disseminate ideas, instructions, or data. The second assumes that humans are relational beings who use language as one of many ways to experience and affirm mutual presence. The first view is aligned with the spread of civilisation and the consolidation of large-scale societies. It assumes the necessity of standardised languages, mass literacy, and information management systems. The second remains closer to tribal, familial, or conspiratorial contexts—where language functions as a

breath shared, not a signal broadcast. The Latin root 'conspirare'—to breathe together—captures the second paradigm well. Communication as conspiracy implies an intimate social logic: people come together not merely to exchange thoughts, but to become something together. In this context, meaning is not transmitted; it is co-created. Speech becomes an act of trust, not a delivery. Words do not merely name things but allow participants to form a common life. Each model of communication has its own logic of failure. In the transmission model, failure is technical—noise, interference, misinterpretation. Solutions are technological and structural: more bandwidth, clearer signals, universal grammar. In the communion model, failure is emotional or ethical—dishonesty, alienation, or indifference. Solutions here are relational: presence, listening, confession, or silence. The dominance of the transmission paradigm shapes not only communication technologies but also academic disciplines. Communication studies, as it evolved in the twentieth century, often privileged models such as Shannon and Weaver's, emphasising linear flows and feedback loops. Even interaction and transaction models rarely escape the underlying metaphor of exchange. Sociology and political science adopted these models to describe mass opinion, propaganda, and media influence. The result is a prevailing assumption that language's main function is control—whether over others, environments, or systems. But communication also involves association, the slow and uncertain work of building understanding, kinship, and shared life. This associative paradigm is harder to study, harder to quantify, and less profitable—but no less real. It sees communication not as the key to mastering the world but as the ground of becoming human. Civilisations rise by building systems of transmission. But when these systems collapse—through war, ecological crisis, or social fragmentation—what remains are small associations of meaning, trust, and speech. Tribal associations form again, not around the best-spoken message, but around the most trustworthy speaker. Words become sparse, but presence becomes vital. Understanding returns, not through loudness or scale, but through silence, intimacy, and the breath of speech between people. This contrast between communication as control and communication as communion also highlights the risk of abstraction. If language is treated as a divine tool or universal force—defining humanity itself—then speech becomes sacred and must be universally transmitted. In this light, mass literacy, public speaking, and social media are seen as civilising acts. But if speech is merely one possible way of being-with-others, then silence, ritual, gesture, or shared labour can be equally communicative. Ultimately, the two paradigms do not exclude each other, but they compete for dominance. In periods of expansion and consolidation, transmission triumphs—empire, ideology, and media flourish. In times of collapse and renewal, association returns—speech becomes again a quiet breath, a conspiracy of presence. To understand communication in its full depth, both models must be considered, not as stages of development, but as coexisting ways of being human. The paradigm of transmission is based on mass indoctrination, manufacturing of content and consumption of news. The new paradigm of communication as association must be built on ethical principles. What combination of reforms, designs, and community practices could ensure an associative communication grounded in shared presence, trust, and co-creation of meaning is actively integrated into societies and platforms? How might such integration be measured, sustained, and protected against instrumentalisation?

1.3. Paradigm change

(Ethical turn in communication: Language as mirror, not weapon)

'A change of paradigm is not only a change in theory—it is a change in what counts as truth'.

— Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions

'A theory of communication must now account for decentralisation, participation, interactivity, and fragmentation—not just influence and control'.

— Denis McQuail, Mass Communication Theory

'Communication of ethics' is the new paradigm that must break with both control and manipulation, calling for a language grounded in honesty, humility, and mutual presence. Communication is no longer a strategic act but an ethical encounter—fragile, open, and unarmed. This transformation is not driven by innovative technologies, but by the historical need for peace after centuries of linguistic warfare. What remains is either a language of peace—or a dignified silence. A paradigm change in language and communication theory is not merely an academic correction—it is a rupture in how reality, meaning, and power are organised. As earlier sections on deception and manipulation have shown, when language becomes a tool for control rather than understanding, the very medium of shared meaning collapses into a field of strategies, disguises, and distortions. In this degraded state, the prevailing model of mass communication—premised on influence, persuasion, and manipulation—becomes obsolete. If deception is always structurally possible within language, then the current paradigm that relies on trust in rational discourse, universal comprehension, and consensus is futile. A new paradigm must emerge, not as a technical upgrade but as an ethical transformation. This shift calls for language to move beyond its traditional function as a representational system—a mirror of fixed truths—and toward a self-aware instrument of reflection, rooted in honesty, responsibility, and transparency. Thinkers like Deleuze have already challenged the metaphysical assumptions of representation itself, exposing how categories like identity, truth, and meaning are not stable foundations but mobile, contingent processes. Similarly, the rise of hybrid media systems has revealed the fragmentation, interactivity, and vulnerability of digital communication, showing that mass communication no longer functions within coherent, centralised structures. Thus, paradigm change requires not just theoretical innovation but a new linguistic ethos: language must relinquish its obsession with persuasion, control, and eloquence, and instead accept its role as an uncertain but sincere medium of engagement. The transformation is not technological but existential. It is a call to remake the very principles by which humans speak, write, and relate to one another—not for influence, but for clarity; not for power, but for trust. The historical function of language as a means of human understanding has been eclipsed by its instrumentalisation as a vehicle of persuasion, manipulation, and ideological control. In communication theory, this shift reflects a deeper epistemic crisis—where language ceases to reveal and begins to obscure. Denis McQuail, in his 'Reflections on Paradigm Change in Communication Theory and Research', recognised the instability of dominant models that privilege control, linearity, and transmission over complexity, ethics, and meaning. He called for a rethinking of foundational assumptions—an opening toward alternative paradigms that can better account for the symbolic, relational, and power-laden nature of communication. The need for such a transformation is echoed across critical traditions that uncover how communicative acts reproduce ideological structures. Herman and Chomsky’s 'Propaganda Model' reveals how the language of mass media, under the guise of neutrality, manufactures consent through selective framing and silence. UNESCO’s 'New World Information and Communication Order' and the McBride Report once gestured toward a more pluralistic and just communicative order—but these visions were left unrealised. Today, as speech itself is commodified and strategic performance replaces genuine dialogue, a new paradigm must emerge. One rooted not in influence or control, but in ethical responsibility,

epistemic humility, and communicative authenticity. A new linguistic ethos is required—one that relinquishes persuasion as an end and restores language to its original function as a medium of human understanding. Words must become gifts, not weapons; invitations, not impositions. Ethical communication demands novel methods: meta-languages that expose hidden assumptions, digital protocols that prioritise transparency over engagement metrics, and educational practices that cultivate epistemic humility and active listening. Only through such interdisciplinary innovation can language serve its highest calling: not to conquer minds, but to foster solidarity, illuminate difference, and honour the fragile work of mutual becoming.

Paradigm change in communication theory

Denis McQuail's analysis of communication theory addresses a profound transformation in how media and communication are conceptualised, researched, and practiced. A 'paradigm change', in this context, refers to a fundamental shift in the foundational assumptions and frameworks that structure an academic field. In communication studies—an evolving and still-young discipline—this shift has been especially influenced by technological innovations and media practices, often outpacing the pace of theoretical reflection. McQuail traces how the initial mass communication paradigm has slowly eroded, giving way to a more pluralistic and interactive understanding of communication. Rather than a single linear transformation, he identifies several overlapping changes across three key areas: media effects, audience reception, and the nature of communicative relationships. The early paradigm, dominant in the mid-20th century, conceived of communication as a one-way process of message transmission from centralised sources (e.g., newspapers, radio, film) to a passive mass audience. This model emphasised control, influence, and predictability, supported by research on propaganda, advertising, and persuasion. It reflected a belief in the power of media to shape opinions and behaviours uniformly across large populations. However, over time, this framework faced growing criticism. Empirical findings increasingly demonstrated that audience interpretation was shaped by social context, prior knowledge, and selective exposure. The mass audience turned out to be more fragmented, resistant, and self-directed than initially assumed. Parallel to these empirical challenges, communication theory began to incorporate more interactive models. Scholars shifted their focus from how messages are transmitted to how they are received, interpreted, and negotiated. New frameworks, such as agenda-setting, framing, and cultivation theory, maintained an interest in media effects but acknowledged more complex, long-term, and contextually mediated influences. This theoretical evolution signalled the beginning of a new paradigm, one that no longer presumed a singular message flowing unchanged from sender to receiver. Audience research further accelerated this transition. The passive receiver gave way to an active user—an interpreter, participant, and co-creator of meaning. Uses and gratifications theory explored why audiences seek media, while reception theory, especially through cultural studies, demonstrated how individuals and groups assign diverse meanings to the same content. This marked a break from the mass audience concept and toward an understanding of segmented, interpretive, and networked publics. Technological change also played a pivotal role. The shift from one-to-many broadcast media to interactive, peer-to-peer, and algorithmically driven networks disrupted conventional models of communication. New media forms—social platforms, messaging apps, streaming services—blurred the line between producers and consumers. McQuail is identifying various modes of information exchange beyond transmission, including consultation and conversation. These newer models reflect today's reality, where roles are fluid, feedback is immediate, and content is adaptive. Communication is reconceived not as simple message transfer but as a reciprocal process of meaning construction, constantly shaped by context, audience interpretation, and

social interaction. Despite these changes, McQuail argues that a coherent new paradigm has yet to solidify. Instead, communication theory appears to be moving toward a family of related models that capture various dimensions of a decentralised, interactive, and participatory communication environment. While mass media institutions still exist and exert influence, their power is now embedded within broader, more fluid communicative ecosystems. In conclusion, McQuail's reflections suggest that communication theory has evolved from a mechanistic transmission model to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of meaning-making. Paradigm change in this field is less a sudden rupture than a cumulative transformation across several fronts—audiences, technologies, and theoretical assumptions. Future research must embrace complexity and plurality to address how communication operates in an age of networks, platforms, and global interdependence. Though the old transmission model remains entrenched in commercial and political practice, McQuail calls for a redefinition of the field's priorities—to better reflect communication's cultural resonance and ethical stakes. We witness a cumulative shift from a unidirectional, transmission-focused model to a decentralised, participatory ecosystem within an ever-evolving network of producers and consumers. How might practitioners adapt strategic, ethical, and pedagogical approaches to foster genuine engagement, co-creative meaning-making, and cultural resonance?

McQuail's Mass Communication Theory

Denis McQuail's contributions to media and communication theory[110] present a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationships between media systems, societies, and individuals. His work identifies key themes that consistently emerge in the analysis of mass communication and illuminates how these themes interact with broader technological, cultural, and political developments. McQuail emphasised that communication is not a neutral or static process but one deeply embedded in questions of time, place, power, meaning, identity, and governance. Time is central to communication, affecting how long it takes for a message to be delivered, stored, or retrieved. Modern media has transformed this temporality, compressing communication into near-instantaneous exchanges while simultaneously archiving it for future reference. But this also raises concerns—especially in digital environments—around data control, surveillance, and memory. Similarly, place once anchored communication in specific cultural or geographical contexts. With the rise of digital networks, communication now creates 'placeless places', where globalised, virtual communities challenge the boundaries of traditional social spaces. Power is a recurring concern in McQuail's theory. Media functions as a tool of influence, shaping public opinion, reinforcing authority, or, alternatively, exposing and resisting dominant narratives. This power is unevenly distributed and often reinforces structural inequalities along lines of class, race, gender, and nationality. In this context, media not only reports on social reality but also helps construct it. Representations of events, people, and institutions in media carry enormous weight in shaping public consciousness—raising critical questions about accuracy, objectivity, and manipulation. McQuail's model recognises that meaning is never fixed. It varies depending on whether the sender, the receiver, or a third-party observer interprets it. The ambiguity of meaning gives rise to misunderstandings, conflicting interpretations, and ideological struggles. This has led to an important theoretical tension in communication studies: whether media merely reflect social reality or actively create and distort it. While early theories leaned on a correspondence model—

[110] Mcquail, D. (2012). McQuail's mass communication theory. Los Angeles Calif. ; London: Sage.

expecting media to mirror reality—more recent critiques suggest this is an outdated assumption. Media constructs, frames, and reinterprets the world, often privileging certain voices and perspectives while marginalising others. This leads to the question of bias. Media bias is not simply the result of ideological manipulation; it is often embedded in the institutional routines, professional norms, and economic constraints of media production. Studies show that certain topics—like violent crime or political scandal—receive disproportionate attention, while deeper, systemic issues go underreported. Audiences, too, contribute to this distortion by gravitating toward spectacle, emotional narratives, and entertainment. Moreover, people often interpret media content through the lens of their own beliefs and identities, reinforcing confirmation biases. Structuralist and semiotic approaches have become vital tools for unpacking these layers of meaning. They explore how signs, symbols, and images construct cultural narratives within media texts. Denotation and connotation interact to create powerful associations, especially in visual communication. Iconic photographs and televised imagery play a central role in shaping public perception, often surpassing the impact of verbal reporting. McQuail also highlights identity as both a product and a function of media. Mass media contributes to the formation of individual and collective identities, influencing how people see themselves in relation to social groups, institutions, and global cultures. Cultural differences, far from being erased by global media, continue to shape the reception and interpretation of content. This underscores the need for media studies to remain sensitive to diversity and avoid universalising assumptions. Governance, finally, serves as the backdrop to all media activity. Laws, regulations, market dynamics, and ethical norms define what media can do, how it operates, and whom it serves. The need for responsible oversight becomes more urgent as media technologies evolve, especially in periods of rapid transformation. Regulation must balance freedom of expression with accountability, public interest with private control, and innovation with ethical responsibility. In sum, McQuail's theory provides a multi-dimensional lens for understanding media as a dynamic force in society. It emphasises not only the effects of media but the processes through which meaning is made, power is exercised, and culture is shaped. His work remains foundational in mapping the terrain of communication studies in an increasingly global and digital age. The goal is to rethink and reshape the ethical, inclusive, and culturally attuned production, distribution, and interpretation of media in our digitally interconnected world? How can emerging lenses—like networked publics, algorithmic mediation, and participatory culture—be mobilised to do that?

Exploration of language regulation

Denis McQuail's work on media regulation illuminates the delicate balance between protecting freedom of expression and ensuring responsible public communication. In his view, language regulation within mass media is essential not as a tool of censorship, but as a mechanism to guide communication systems through moments of disruption, technological transition, or social instability. The regulation of structure, conduct, and content aims to align media operations with public interest, cultural diversity, and ethical standards. For McQuail, this regulation must be both temporary and adaptive—serving to stabilise communicational-linguistic systems without becoming a permanent mode of control. Media regulation takes various forms, enacted by governments, institutions, or self-regulatory bodies. Historically, its roots can be traced back to the rise of the printing press when language control was first institutionalised to manage dissent and consolidate power. Over time, regulatory frameworks expanded across print, broadcasting, film, and now digital media. Language, as the medium of meaning and persuasion, lies at the heart of these efforts. Regulation today addresses both overt content—such as political speech or misinformation—and the underlying structures that shape

media ownership, access, and diversity. The aims of language regulation are manifold. First, it protects the public from harm by preventing hate speech, incitement, and deception. Second, it supports cultural preservation, safeguarding minority languages and national identities in an era of global homogenisation. Third, it ensures fairness and pluralism in public discourse, resisting monopolistic control over narratives. Lastly, it promotes accountability by requiring transparency, ethical standards, and editorial responsibility. All these goals seek to mediate the inherent tension between linguistic freedom and social cohesion. Different models of regulation reflect divergent political and cultural priorities. The authoritarian model imposes strict control to maintain ideological conformity. The liberal model trusts market dynamics and individual freedoms, limiting state intervention. The social responsibility model strikes a middle path, emphasising the ethical obligations of media while defending expression. The development model uses language regulation to support national goals, while the alternative media model champions community-based, participatory voices. McQuail treats these models not as rigid categories, but as lenses to understand how language policy reflects deeper ideological choices about communication and power. Technological convergence complicates these traditional frameworks. The rise of digital platforms, AI-generated content, and global media networks creates regulatory challenges that transcend national borders. Online communication erodes older distinctions between private and public speech, while algorithmic curation shifts editorial power from journalists to code. In this environment, regulation must evolve to remain relevant—addressing new forms of linguistic manipulation, reinforcing trust, and avoiding overreach. McQuail stresses that regulation should act as a temporary corrector, not a permanent restriction. Once a system regains balance, self-regulation and participatory norms should take precedence. Ultimately, McQuail advocates for a new communication paradigm—one that integrates insights from sociology, cultural theory, political science, and ethics. Traditional transmission models, focused narrowly on message delivery, fail to capture the complexities of meaning, context, and audience agency. A more holistic framework must consider how language in media not only reflects society but shapes it. This call for paradigm change extends to linguistics, which must also move beyond static models and engage with the ethical, political, and technological forces that influence language in contemporary society. In McQuail's vision, regulation is not merely a legal or institutional practice but a linguistic and ethical responsibility. It enables communication systems to serve society and human dignity—ensuring that media language remains a bridge for understanding rather than a tool for domination. The imperative for temporary, adaptive language regulation that safeguards cultural diversity, social cohesion, and human dignity eschews permanent control. What interdisciplinary governance models and participatory mechanisms can most effectively balance freedom of expression with ethical accountability across increasingly transnational and algorithmically mediated media environments?

New paradigm of communication

The new communication theory must integrate ethical, cultural, and political dimensions. In this new linguistic framework, communication becomes not only a technical function but a social practice deeply rooted in the human struggle for understanding, recognition, and agency. For much of modern intellectual history, language has been treated as an instrument of authority—shaping public opinion, constructing ideological systems, and maintaining the dominance of ruling groups. The Marxist observation that 'the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling classes' captures how language functions not merely as a means of description but as a mechanism of political reproduction. In this model, language is never neutral; it circulates in service of control or resistance, reinforcing the binary logic of domination and counter-

domination. However, this cycle of linguistic conquest has exhausted language's capacity to create shared meaning. This paradigm would reject the premise that communication is a battlefield of the ruling ideas. Instead, it would redefine language as a medium of humility, trust, and ethical encounter. Rather than being used to impose, defend, or destabilise power, language would be deployed to open spaces for listening, hospitality, and mutual recognition. In this reimagined framework, the purpose of language is not to conquer minds but to build fragile, temporary, but meaningful bridges between people. Understanding replaces persuasion. Recognition supplants ideological triumph. The aim is no longer to rule others' thoughts but to meet them where they are. This perspective demands a new ethical vocabulary—one based not in influence but in shared vulnerability. Historically, both linguistics and communication studies were shaped by mechanistic, instrumental frameworks. The early 20th-century models of communication, built on the logic of transmission, mirrored structuralist linguistics with its emphasis on syntax, grammar, and formal systems. In both fields, meaning was treated as a fixed object passed from sender to receiver, measurable and controllable. The audience was passive, the structure rigid, and the goal efficiency. In this model, language was stripped of its dialogic, ethical, and social dimensions. The reduction of language to system and communication to transmission removed the possibility for ambiguity, ambiguity that is central to understanding, trust, and humanity. To undo this legacy, a new model must view language not as structure but as relation. Communication becomes a practice of ethics, not just technique. In this view, there are no 'ruling ideas', because the goal is not to rule—but to understand. Words no longer dominate; they invite. Language no longer classifies; it listens. The political implications are significant. A society structured around such a view of communication would de-centre power in discourse, replacing hierarchies of speaking with circles of hearing. Such a shift could begin to resolve the crisis of public trust, the breakdown of shared meaning, and the escalating linguistic violence of digital life. If language creates reality—as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests—then reshaping how language is used reconfigures the reality people live in. Advertising, political rhetoric, and consumer culture rely on manipulating language to create dissatisfaction, dependency, and desire. Words become obstacles, redirecting attention, inflating needs, and distorting perceptions of fulfilment. In contrast, the new paradigm would reconstitute language as a space for alignment between word and world. Reclaiming language requires exposing the scaffolding of linguistic manipulation and reasserting the possibility of ethical speech. Not by adding more noise, but by simplifying the signal. The transformation begins in how people speak to each other: whether language is used to impose certainties or to explore uncertainties. Communication becomes not an arena for domination, but a shared effort toward clarity and care. This vision is not utopian but necessary. If language continues to serve only power, then it will cease to serve meaning. A society built on ruling ideas will collapse under the weight of its own slogans. Only by stepping outside the loop of language-as-power can people restore its function as a tool of mutual becoming. No longer a weapon, language becomes a gift—offered without demand, received without suspicion, and held in common. Such a paradigm shift is not merely academic; it is existential. It asks whether people are prepared to abandon control in favour of connection, to leave behind ruling ideas in search of shared understanding. Language is a gift of mutual becoming rather than a tool of domination. What cultural, educational, and policy shifts would be required to cultivate an ethos of listening, humility, and ethical encounter in everyday communication?

New paradigm of linguistics

Denis McQuail's reflections on paradigm change in communication theory provide a foundation for rethinking the role of linguistics in the evolution of mass communication. A

genuine transformation in communication studies cannot occur without a fundamental reorientation of linguistic theory. Language is not a passive vessel for messages but the condition of possibility for meaning itself. Communication cannot be reimagined without first revising how language is understood—not as a fixed structure but as a dynamic, socially embedded process. Traditional communication theory, grounded in the early 20th-century model of mass media, treated language as a neutral transmission channel. In parallel, early linguistic theory focused on formal grammar, viewing language as a closed system defined by syntactic rules and internal consistency. These mechanistic views aligned with the linear model of communication, where information flowed unidirectionally from sender to receiver, and meaning was assumed to be fixed and recoverable. Such models neglected the interpretive, contested, and contextual nature of language. They overlooked how power and ideology operate through speech, how identity is inscribed in linguistic practice, and how meaning is constantly negotiated in social contexts. The emergence of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis marked a shift toward understanding language as performative, situated, and socially constructed. These developments reflect a move away from abstract competence toward concrete performance—what people say and do with language in real-world contexts. Digital and multimodal media further expose the limitations of conventional linguistic models. Online communication merges text, image, audio, and gesture into hybrid forms that resist analysis through structural linguistics alone. Social media discourse, driven by speed, irony, brevity, and virality, blurs traditional distinctions between speaker and audience, grammar and improvisation, official and vernacular registers. Language, in these settings, becomes an evolving negotiation, not a stable code. A new paradigm of linguistics must therefore embrace instability, plurality, and the co-production of meaning. It must address language not as an object but as an event—emerging between people, shaped by context, mediated by culture, and always ethically implicated. This shift carries major consequences for how mass communication is understood. If language is fluid, then communication outcomes cannot be easily predicted or controlled. Media messages no longer guarantee fixed effects but invite interpretation, resistance, and transformation. The audience is not a passive recipient but a linguistic actor who redefines the message in the act of reception. Recognising this repositions communication not as an imposition of meaning but as a collaboration—however fragile or conflicted—between language users. A renewed linguistic paradigm must confront the political implications of language. It must explore how linguistic norms are constructed, who enforces them, and who is excluded. The problem in linguistics of using language to understand language reveals a profound philosophical paradox. Language is both the tool and the object of analysis, making it fundamentally self-referential. This recursion traps thought within the very structures it seeks to understand. Saying 'the word ‘word’ is a word' immediately illustrates this loop, where each attempt to define or escape language relies on language itself. This circularity renders any purely linguistic critique of language inherently limited. It is as if language is a mirror facing another mirror, producing infinite reflections but no exit. To confront this paradox, a new language about language is needed—one that does not merely extend existing terms but shifts the way humans conceptualise linguistic meaning. Language does more than describe the world—it constructs it. It sets the boundaries of what can be thought, named, and shared. The limits of language are not simply grammatical or lexical but cognitive and perceptual. Language shapes not just communication but also consciousness. When problems arise from within this framework, any attempted solution using the same linguistic tools is inevitably inadequate. Which interdisciplinary, ethical, and digital approaches can break linguistics’ self-referential loop and enable responsible, collaborative meaning-making in modern media?

Toward a linguistic mirror

The new language about language must operate as a 'meta-language'—a framework that enables reflection on the structures, assumptions, and blind spots embedded in ordinary speech. Rather than adding novel words or grammar, it must challenge the architecture of expression. Five core principles could guide such a language. First, 'non-linear thinking': traditional language relies heavily on linear order—subject, verb, object—which enforces sequential logic. A new language might borrow from spatial, visual, or symbolic systems to represent networks of meaning rather than linear progressions. Second, 'embracing ambiguity and multiplicity': standard language tends to exclude ambiguity in favour of clarity and control. Yet ambiguity reflects the complexity of reality. A new language would allow for layered meanings and unresolved tensions without collapsing them into simplicity. Third, 'meta-awareness': this language would contain explicit cues about context, intent, and uncertainty, allowing users to reflect on their expressions and their implications as they speak. Fourth, 'integration of emotion and intuition': while current language systems often marginalise affect and instinct, a fuller language would welcome these as valid and essential forms of knowledge. Fifth, 'dynamic evolution': this language must remain open-ended, designed for continual revision rather than institutional stability. The new language about language must abandon its entanglement in emotion, persuasion, and the desire for admiration. Rather than functioning as a tool for power, beauty, or seduction, this language would serve as an unfiltered mirror of reality—devoid of vanity, bias, or self-interest. It would not aim to entertain or convince but to reveal. This linguistic mirror would neither amplify nor diminish, neither distort nor idealise. Its function would be to present the world as it is: complex, contradictory, and often indifferent to human desires. Such a language would no longer aspire to sound eloquent, logical, or even intelligent. It would tolerate clumsiness, embrace ambiguity, and resist the urge to simplify reality for the sake of understanding. Beauty would be irrelevant. Logic would be viewed as one possible structure among many, not a divine or final order. The emphasis would shift from expression to reflection—from shaping meaning to observing it as it emerges. In its clearest form, this language would no longer serve ambition, ideology, or even culture. It would exist as a neutral instrument, stripping away centuries of rhetorical accumulation and poetic embellishment. To arrive at this mirror-like state, language must be cleansed of its historical burden—the weight of being used to manipulate, persuade, and dominate. The cultural and emotional sediment embedded in words must be shaken loose. Even concepts like truth and clarity must be re-examined, not as universal goals but as situational reflections of a speaker's context. This new linguistic paradigm would reject the self-love common to many traditional languages—the pride in structure, complexity, or eloquence. Instead, it would function like a lens: invisible, useful only in what it enables people to see. This pursuit of a pure linguistic mirror faces significant challenges. Reality is not orderly or consistent, and reflecting it truthfully requires a tolerance for contradiction and chaos. The language must not become a new ideology under the guise of honesty. It must resist the impulse to impose meaning or assert authority. Instead, it must allow for meaning to arise, however fragmented or unstable, from the interaction between the speaker, the context, and the subject at hand. This brings us to a deeper truth: even the most honest language is still a fiction. All language is metaphor—a constructed system of symbols standing in for things it can never truly embody. When people say 'grief' or 'truth', they are not encountering those things directly but accessing culturally filtered, subjectively shaped interpretations. Language is not a mirror of nature or self but a tool of projection and construction. It organises experience, filters perception, and enables people to act as if they share a world they can name. Yet, within this fiction lies an unexpected truth. Every utterance

is true in the sense that it reflects the subjective state of the one who speaks. It may be incomplete, biased, or deluded—but it is always a manifestation of someone's inner world. The linguistic mirror, therefore, reflects not objective reality but the layered reality of human subjectivity. This does not negate its value. On the contrary, it reveals how deeply language is woven into the human condition: not as a means of uncovering absolute truth, but as a framework for navigating the flux of being. Toward a linguistic mirror means not abandoning language's artifice but understanding it. It means using language not to conquer or comfort, but to see—without adornment, without denial. This is not a call for silence, nor for sterile precision, but for a radical kind of honesty. Language cannot stop being fiction, but it can begin to be aware of its fictionality. It can become a disciplined reflection—not a painting of what should be, but a lens focused on what is. What design principles, research methods, and ethical commitments are needed to craft a meta-language that acts as a disciplined mirror? We should start with acknowledging its fictionality, embracing ambiguity and resisting manipulation.

2. LINGUISTICS

2.1. From logos to langue

(Words, Signs, and Systems: The western evolution of linguistic thought)

'The word is not the thing'.

— Alfred Korzybski, Science and Sanity

'Language is not a function of the speaker, it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual'.

— Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics

Linguistic thought from Socrates to Saussure[111]

In 'Landmarks in Linguistic Thought: The Western Tradition from Socrates to Saussure' by Roy Harris, language is seen as central to human identity, not only as a medium of expression but as the condition for law, morality, and political order. The Greek term 'logos' captured both speech and reason, making language inseparable from thought itself. In this vision, language defined the rational animal. From Homer to Plato, language was revered as a vehicle of truth and collective memory. The Sophists, despite their controversial status, were among the first to treat language as a subject for systematic inquiry, sparking debates that shaped philosophical inquiry for centuries. These debates centred around questions that would echo through linguistic history: Is language natural or conventional? Is it governed by fixed rules? Can it be broken down into universal parts of speech? Greek thought remained relatively insular, focusing primarily on its own dialects, but the political expansion of Hellenism and later the Roman Empire gave language a new role as a unifying and governing tool. Latin, adopted across the empire, carried with it the grammatical categories and rhetorical structures inherited from Greece. Public discourse became formalised through grammar, rhetoric, and logic—three

[111] Harris, R. and Taylor, T.J. (1997). Landmarks in linguistic thought : the Western tradition from Socrates to Saussure. London ; New York: Routledge.

disciplines that were interwoven in Roman education and administration. Medieval Europe inherited this classical legacy, with Latin remaining the language of power, religion, and scholarship. Education revolved around the trivium, and Latin grammar was preserved and taught with near-religious reverence. The Renaissance and early modern periods brought exposure to new languages and revitalised ancient ones. The printing press and voyages of exploration made linguistic diversity a new fact of life, though early humanists still viewed Greek and Latin as the highest standards. Over time, vernacular languages gained ground, and attention shifted to their structure and development. Language was no longer just a passive mirror of eternal truths but began to be seen as a living, changing force shaped by culture, history, and human creativity. The Enlightenment further transformed linguistic inquiry. The emergence of comparative philology in the nineteenth century, fuelled by the discovery of Sanskrit, led to the reconstruction of language families and historical change. The Indo-European hypothesis and the methods of the Neogrammarians introduced a scientific approach to linguistic evolution, often modelled on biological principles. Finally, with Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism, the focus shifted from the historical development of language to its internal systems and oppositions. Language was no longer a mere label for external reality, but a structure of signs governed by relations and difference. This marked a decisive break with the older tradition and opened the door to twentieth-century linguistic theories. The traditional view of language as the vessel of rational thought and social order now faces its structuralist counterpart: a self-contained system of signs, detached from external reality. How does the shift from understanding language as 'logos'—the union of reason and speech—to Saussure's 'langue'—a system of arbitrary signs—alter our conception of language's power to shape thought and collective life?

Socrates on names as conventions

In Plato's 'Cratylus', Socrates explores the question of whether names are naturally correct or simply the result of human convention. The dialogue, involving Socrates and his interlocutors Hermogenes and Cratylus, presents the earliest recorded philosophical debate on language in Western thought. Cratylus asserts that names have a natural correctness grounded in the essence of things, while Hermogenes contends that names are merely conventions agreed upon by users. Socrates mediates between these extremes, suggesting that although language contains conventional elements, it cannot be entirely arbitrary if it is to function as a tool of knowledge and communication. Socrates likens language to tools like a loom or a hammer—objects that have a structure suited to a specific function. Just as a tool reflects its purpose in its design, so must a name reflect the nature of the object it names. He suggests that early name-givers, through intuition or insight, attempted to encode the essence of things into the sound and structure of words. Names, then, are not mere labels but attempts to mirror reality using the elements of speech—letters, syllables, and phonetic composition. The Greek word 'onoma' includes both proper names and general terms, reflecting how ancient thinkers did not yet separate linguistic categories systematically. Socrates' method includes etymological exploration—sometimes playful, sometimes speculative—to demonstrate how names might relate to meaning. He points to examples where names seem to correspond naturally to their referents, such as Astyanax, 'lord of the city', which reflects the role of Hector's son, and suggests that such names carry more than convention—they carry meaning through resemblance. However, Socrates also warns against overly liberal etymology. If one inserts or removes letters at will, any word can be made to mean anything, rendering etymology arbitrary and unreliable. The integrity of names, like the integrity of arguments, depends on restraint and reason. Still, Socrates admits that pronunciation changes over time and that some Greek words

derive from foreign languages, which complicates the task of interpreting names' origins. This acknowledgement reflects the complexity of linguistic development and the interplay between natural and social forces in language. Cratylus ultimately retreats into a rigid view of naturalism, claiming that only the correct name truly names a thing. Hermogenes, by contrast, maintains that names are assigned by usage and can change with no loss of meaning. Socrates suggests a middle path: names originate with a rational attempt to express truth, but language is shaped over time by convention and context. The essence of the original name may persist, but its usage and pronunciation evolve. For Socrates, the stakes of the debate go beyond linguistics. If language is disconnected from reality, then communication collapses into manipulation, and truth becomes impossible to attain. Plato uses this dialogue to argue for the philosophical grounding of language in truth, not in social agreement. Language, though imperfect, points toward the eternal realities of the forms. It is the bridge between the material and the intelligible world—a medium for philosophy, not merely for rhetoric. Socrates' middle path is that names begin as attempts to capture the essence of things but inevitably evolve through convention. Can language ever fully mirror reality or remains forever a blend of intuition and agreement?

The Bible and diversification of language

The Biblical account of language begins with a striking moment of divine delegation: God forms every beast of the field and brings them to Adam to see what he will name them. This act, recounted in 'Genesis 2:19–20', presents naming as the inaugural human act—language as humanity's first responsibility. Adam is not given names; he creates them. Whatever Adam calls each living creature becomes its name. This story positions the human capacity for naming as an essential element of creation itself, not merely a response to it. In this view, language is both a gift and a power—a divine trust placed in human hands. Unlike some linguistic traditions that view language as inherent in nature or divine utterance, the Genesis account assumes language originates with human invention, albeit within a sacred context. Adam's naming of animals is not corrected or guided by God, suggesting that names do not possess innate correctness, but instead derive their legitimacy from human assignment. This implies a conventionalist view like Hermogenes in Plato's 'Cratylus': names are valid because they are agreed upon, not because they mirror a natural essence. This idea gains theological weight through its silence: the text does not explain how Adam chooses names, leaving his creative process to interpretation. Enlightenment philosophers speculated widely—Leibniz believed names mirrored the mental images of objects; Locke saw naming as a pragmatic act, grounded in sense perception and abstraction. But Genesis itself remains focused on the functional outcome: language exists because Adam names, and the world is made intelligible through those names. The narrative of the Tower of Babel in 'Genesis 11' shifts the focus from origin to diversification. At first, humanity is united by one language and one speech. Their shared ambition—to build a tower reaching to heaven—represents the collective power of linguistic unity. God's intervention shatters this unity, scattering the people and confounding their language. This moment marks the theological explanation for the plurality of human tongues. Babel (from the Hebrew verb 'balal', 'to confuse') becomes the site where linguistic difference is born, not as punishment per se, but as a divine measure against unchecked human ambition. Theologically, these stories convey a complex relationship between language, authority, and limitation. Adam's naming grants humanity linguistic dominion: Babel introduces its boundaries. The result is a paradox: language is both a sign of human rationality and a limit to human pride. Names are tools of order, but also reminders of disorder. Philosophically, these texts embed core assumptions into Western thought. They present names as secondary to things, supporting the idea that words merely stand in for meanings—

nomenclaturism. This view resurfaces in later thinkers, from Augustine to Wittgenstein, who describe language as a rule-bound, social tool. Yet in both Biblical stories, naming takes place in solitude—Adam names before Eve exists; Babel's confusion occurs en masse but ends in division—suggesting that language precedes, and perhaps even enables, social life itself. Together, the Genesis accounts reflect the enduring tension between unity and plurality, authority and ambiguity, creation, and confusion—all through the lens of language. How does the movement from Adam's creative act of naming to the Tower of Babel's fragmentation shape our understanding of language as both a source of order and a catalyst for disunity?

Thomas of Erfurt and William Caxton

Thomas of Erfurt's 'Grammatica Speculativa', composed in the early 14th century, marks one of the most ambitious attempts to treat grammar as a rational science. As a leading figure among the Modistae, or speculative grammarians, Thomas sought to uncover the universal principles of language through what he called the 'modi significandi'—modes of signifying. He opens his treatise by declaring that a true understanding of grammar depends on recognising its foundational principles, which reflect not only linguistic rules but also metaphysical and logical structures. Grammar, for Thomas, is not merely a tool for communication but a mirror of reality, designed in harmony with the divine order. Influenced by Aristotle and the scholastic method, Thomas argued that language is shaped by the interplay between the external world, the intellect, and expression. Words correspond to mental impressions, and these impressions in turn correspond to things in the world. Grammar reflects this alignment: signs signify concepts, which reflect being. Thomas divides the modes of signifying into active and passive types. Active modes concern how sound patterns convey the nature of things—such as actions or qualities—while passive modes relate to how the properties of those things determine the function and form of their corresponding words. A verb like 'trod' expresses an action (active mode) and is categorised as a verb (passive mode), defining how it combines syntactically. Thomas believed that understanding these modes was essential not just for proper usage but for grasping how thought becomes language. This conception of grammar as the bridge between thought and being informed the Modistae's broader project to unite grammar with logic. Grammar organises language into signs, words, and parts of speech, forming the raw material for logical propositions. For Thomas, syllogistic reasoning and scientific discourse are possible only because language has an internal structure that mirrors reality. Yet Thomas's vision is not without limitations. His model, developed in the context of Latin scholasticism, assumes Latin as the default or universal language. This overlooks the vast grammatical diversity of the world's languages and fails to account for irregularities, exceptions, and context-dependent variation. For example, his explanation of gender as metaphysically motivated breaks down when applied to lexical pairs like 'lapis' (masculine) and 'petra' (feminine), both meaning 'stone'. By excluding phonetics and privileging symbolic meaning, Thomas's theory neglects how cultural and phonetic differences influence linguistic structures. Still, the speculative grammarians left a lasting imprint. Their belief that language embodies a rational, universal order foreshadowed later efforts in comparative and structural linguistics. More than a century later, William Caxton, England's first printer, confronted a quite different linguistic problem: not the universal logic of language but the chaotic multiplicity of English dialects. In the prologue to his 1490 translation of the 'Eneydos', Caxton recounts an anecdote involving two merchants whose request for eggs was misunderstood due to dialectal variation. One used the northern word 'egges' and was not understood; the other said 'eyren' and was. Caxton uses this moment to reflect on the instability of English, comparing it to the phases of the moon—always shifting and never fixed. For Caxton, this variability posed a serious challenge, especially in the

new age of print. Whereas hand-copied manuscripts could accommodate regional dialects, the printing press required consistency. The problem of what form of English to print became not only a practical dilemma but also a philosophical one about the very nature of language and identity. Caxton's choice to adopt the London dialect—a variety already associated with commerce, governance, and literature—played a crucial role in establishing it as the basis of Standard English. He printed texts in this dialect, not because it was inherently superior, but because it had social prestige and the widest reach. In doing so, Caxton helped transform one regional dialect into a national language. His work illustrates how technological change, linguistic diversity, and social forces converge in the shaping of language. Caxton's reflections mirror a broader European moment. Across the continent, printers, poets, and philosophers were grappling with the challenge of dialectal fragmentation and the desire for linguistic unity. In France, Joachim du Bellay urged the cultivation of French to rival Greek and Latin. In Italy and Spain, similar efforts gave rise to grammars and dictionaries aimed at standardising vernaculars. Together, Thomas of Erfurt and William Caxton represent two poles of linguistic thought in pre-modern Europe. Thomas approached language as a universal logical system, structured by divine and metaphysical laws. Caxton, by contrast, faced language as a historical, unstable, and regionally fragmented phenomenon. Where Thomas sought to explain the eternal principles of signification, Caxton wrestled with the temporal and practical consequences of linguistic variety. Yet both understood language as foundational to human culture—one through theory, the other through practice. Their respective insights reflect how language is shaped both by abstract systems and by the contingencies of history, technology, and geography. The tension between Thomas of Erfurt's quest for a universal, metaphysically grounded grammar and William Caxton's pragmatic standardisation of English dialects illuminate the ways in which abstract linguistic theory and concrete historical forces together shape the evolution of language.

John Locke on the imperfection of words

In Book III of 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' (1689), John Locke explores the nature and function of language, revealing both its indispensability and its deep flaws. For Locke, language is a necessary invention for expressing and sharing the private contents of the mind. Words serve as audible or visible signs for ideas, yet the relationship between word and idea is arbitrary and subjective. Locke warns that this arbitrariness, while enabling language's flexibility, is also its chief imperfection. Since words do not have any natural link to the ideas they signify, communication becomes fragile—especially as the ideas themselves may differ across individuals or cultures. Locke divides ideas into two types: simple ideas, which stem from direct sensory or reflective experience and are generally consistent among individuals, and complex ideas, which are constructed through internal mental combination. These complex constructions—such as 'justice' or 'liberty'—are prone to ambiguity and disagreement because they rely on unstable internal associations. When speakers use words for such ideas, listeners may not associate the same mental content, and so miscommunication emerges not from carelessness, but from the structural imperfection of language itself. Words, then, are doubly flawed: they rest on unstable personal ideas, and their public use assumes an equivalence of understanding that is rarely present. This leads Locke to emphasise the dangers of vague or manipulative speech. In particular, he criticises the use of undefined or metaphorical language in philosophical and political discourse, where clarity is crucial. Figurative speech may be pleasing in literature, but in the pursuit of truth, it tends to obscure rather than illuminate. He writes that those who use words without clear meaning may confuse both themselves and their audience. Locke proposes that the best safeguard against linguistic confusion is clear definition.

Especially in scholarly or scientific discourse, words should be tied to precisely defined ideas, ideally reducible to simple sensory impressions. This effort to clarify language by resolving complex terms into simpler constituents helped shape later Enlightenment interest in dictionaries, grammar, and standardisation. For example, Samuel Johnson's Dictionary aimed to fix the meanings of English words and minimise interpretive chaos—a project deeply inspired by Locke's critique of language's imperfections. Locke also recognises the historical and metaphorical roots of language. Many abstract terms are derived from physical metaphors—'grasping' an idea, for example—which reflects the way early humans extended bodily experience to express internal thoughts. This observation hints at a developmental link between language and cognition: language both expresses and shapes thinking. While Locke sees language primarily as a tool for expressing ideas that already exist in the mind, later thinkers would reverse the relationship, suggesting that thought itself may depend on linguistic structures. Ultimately, Locke is ambivalent about language. He understands it as a powerful and necessary tool for communication, but also a deeply flawed one. Because the meanings of words are private and mutable, and because the ideas they signify may differ between minds, miscommunication is almost inevitable. Still, through careful definition and rational analysis, language can approach clarity. Locke's work laid the foundations for modern linguistic philosophy by exposing the gap between thought and expression, and by insisting on the ethical responsibility of speakers to use words precisely and honestly. Locke's critique of the arbitrary link between words and ideas, and his insistence on the inevitable gap between speaker and listener, challenge our trust in language as a tool for precise communication.

Condillac on the origin of thought

Etienne Bonnot de Condillac proposed a theory in which language and thought develop together, each depending on the other. Against the backdrop of Locke's empiricism, Condillac argued that language is not merely a means of expressing already-formed thoughts but a precondition for the very possibility of thinking as humans understand it. Before the invention of signs, people had only fleeting sensations and instincts, unable to recall, analyse, or communicate their mental content. Language, once formed, allowed ideas to be retained, and compared, enabling reflection and the progress of reason. According to Condillac, the key difference between animals and humans lies in the use of signs. Without language, humans would resemble animals, governed by immediate stimuli. But by attaching sounds or gestures to experiences and recalling them voluntarily, they create the basis for thought. This transformation, from reacting to the world to reflecting upon it, marks the shift from sensation to understanding. Language becomes the tool that makes this possible by allowing voluntary memory and the comparison of ideas. In his speculative account, Condillac imagines language emerging from natural cries and gestures, such as expressions of pain or joy. These natural signs gradually become habitual and intentional, forming artificial signs. Over time, these signs are refined into words, allowing for the analytic dissection of complex experiences. In this process, thought becomes ordered and speech becomes structured. Language, then, is not a later addition to thought but its formative instrument. For Condillac, the process of thinking is fundamentally analytic: breaking down a whole experience into sequential parts. Language, with its linear nature, forces such decomposition. Thought, therefore, is not a mere internal mirror of sensations but a practice shaped by linguistic habits. In this sense, language teaches people how to think. Words guide the mind's movement, and grammatical forms reflect different mental operations—desire, comparison, judgment, and abstraction. A central feature of Condillac's theory is the role of analogy. New words and ideas arise by relating them to already known signs, maintaining continuity in the development of language, and understanding. While the

signs may be artificial and voluntarily imposed, they are not arbitrary in the strict sense; they evolve through analogical reasoning. This process grounds language in experience while also allowing it to expand into abstract realms. Condillac saw the degradation of language—its growing arbitrariness and confusion—as a loss of this original clarity. He imagined an ideal language in which every word transparently reflected the natural structure of thought and its historical development. Such a language would be a record of human understanding and a tool for its further refinement. By asserting that language is the basis of memory, reason, and abstraction, Condillac reshaped philosophical approaches to human knowledge. His work anticipated modern theories that explore how linguistic structures shape cognitive processes. His legacy lies in the claim that to understand human thought, one must begin with the origins and functions of language itself. How does Condillac's claim that language is not merely a vehicle for pre-existing thoughts but the very instrument that shapes and enables them to challenge our understanding of cognition? What might this imply for the ways we teach, learn, and study both language and thought?

Ferdinand de Saussure: Language as a semiological system

Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory, posthumously published in the 'Cours de linguistique générale' (1916), revolutionised modern language studies by framing language as a structured, semiological system. His approach moved beyond viewing language as a passive reflection of external reality or a mechanical naming system. Instead, Saussure emphasised that language is a system of signs, governed by internal relations and social conventions, shaping how people perceive, categorise, and interact with the world. Central to Saussure's theory is the concept of the 'bilateral sign', composed of two inseparable components: the signifier (the sound pattern or word) and the signified (the conceptual meaning associated with it). This formulation challenged the long-standing belief that language naturally corresponds to the objects it names. Saussure emphasised the arbitrariness of the sign, arguing that there is no inherent connection between the signifier and signified; the association is based on social convention and maintained through communal usage. While some exceptions, such as onomatopoeia, might appear less arbitrary, even these are shaped by historical and cultural influences. By divorcing language from direct reference to physical reality and insisting on the psychological nature of meaning, Saussure rejected the simplistic idea that words map neatly onto things. For instance, the word does not refer to an actual thing in the world but to a mental concept shared within a linguistic community. Meaning, then, does not arise from objects but from the oppositional structure of language. This insight marks a foundational shift: language is a relational system, and the identity of each sign depends on its difference from others. This principle of opposition operates on multiple levels: semantic, phonological, morphological, and grammatical. At the semantic level, terms like 'fear', 'dread', and 'anxiety' gain their meaning through contrast. Removing one term would force a redistribution of meaning among the others. At the phonological level, phonemes are defined by how they differ from one another within a given system. Likewise, grammatical categories derive their function and value from their systematic differentiation. Saussure's model introduced further binaries to clarify his theoretical framework: langue versus parole, synchrony versus diachrony, and internal versus external linguistics. Langue refers to the underlying structure of a language—its rules, norms, and conventions—while parole refers to actual speech acts by individuals. Synchrony studies language at a particular moment, treating it as a stable system, while diachrony analyses its historical changes. Saussure prioritised synchronic analysis, arguing that understanding the relational system at a fixed point was a necessary precursor to examining how language evolves over time. In conceptualising language as a social fact, Saussure drew from sociological

traditions, particularly Émile Durkheim's idea that collective norms shape individual behaviour. He viewed language not as a product of individual psychology but as a communal institution—a collective agreement internalised by its speakers. The 'speech circuit' describes how linguistic meaning is generated through interaction between individual minds and social structures. Language exists not in isolated speakers or mental representations but within the communicative network of a community. Saussure critiqued earlier models of language evolution based on social Darwinism, such as those advanced by August Schleicher or Max Müller. He rejected the idea that languages compete like organisms in nature or evolve through territorial adaptation. Instead, he retained the metaphor of language as a living system but emphasised its internal coherence rather than external competition. Language, for Saussure, is a system where every element holds a place due to its difference from others—what he called a 'system of values'. As in economics, the value of a linguistic sign depends on its relation to other signs, not on a fixed referent. Saussure's influence was foundational for structuralist linguistics and extended into fields such as anthropology, literary theory, and semiotics. His emphasis on the interdependence of linguistic signs and the structured nature of meaning inspired theorists like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. Later, generative grammar, particularly through the work of Noam Chomsky, would reject many of Saussure's sociological premises, proposing instead that language is rooted in universal cognitive structures. Chomsky's framework, which posited that language emerged from a genetic mutation and operates through an innate universal grammar, stood in stark contrast to Saussure's focus on language as a product of social convention and systemic relations. Despite such divergences, Saussure's ideas remain central to ongoing debates in linguistics. Functional and cognitive linguists have challenged structuralism's emphasis on opposition and arbitrariness, proposing instead that meaning often arises from similarity and embodied experience. Yet others defend Saussure's framework, arguing that his insights into the nature of linguistic systems remain relevant, especially for understanding how language operates within culture and society. Saussure's vision of language as a collective, structured, and relational system continues to shape contemporary understandings of meaning, communication, and thought. There is no need to infer internal meaning. Communication is successful not when minds align, but when actions do. Saussure showed that language is governed not by correspondence with reality, but by internally structured systems that balance arbitrariness with rule-bound constraint. Meaning arises not from natural signs but from shared human practices embedded in time, use, and form. Language is not a natural or mechanical system and emphasised its cultural, practical, and normative dimensions. Ultimately, our shared concern is not just with how language works, but with what it reveals about the human condition. Communication is not simply about transmitting ideas, but about participating in a shared world of meaning, judgment, and action. How does Saussure's view of language as a system of socially agreed-upon differences (rather than a mirror of external reality) reshape our understanding of how meaning is created and maintained within a community?

2.2. The death of the text

Charles Sanders Peirce

(Peircean semiosis: Icons, indices, and symbols in meaning-making)

'The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit; and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise'.

— Charles Sanders Peirce

An overview of semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs, meaning-making, and the processes by which organisms—human and non-human—interpret and communicate. The field encompasses everything from linguistic utterances to visual symbols, gestures, architectural forms, and even biochemical signals. A sign, broadly defined, is anything that stands for something to someone in some capacity, whether intentionally or not. Meaning, therefore, is not inherent in things themselves but emerges through interpretive acts. The modern foundation of semiotics was laid by Charles Sanders Peirce, who conceived of semiosis as a triadic relationship: a sign (or representamen), its object, and the interpretant—the mental effect or understanding it generates. This model transcended linguistic boundaries and applied to all communicative phenomena, from mathematical symbols to animal behaviour. Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of signifier and signified, Peirce's triadic structure emphasised process and transformation over static structure, making it more applicable to dynamic, real-world situations. Historically, the inquiry into signs dates to Ancient Greece. The term 'semiotics' derives from the Greek 'semeion' ('sign'), used to describe omens and symptoms. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle considered how language connects to truth and reality. Later, Augustine of Hippo advanced a unified theory of signs, distinguishing between things used as signs and things merely observed. This effort to bring nature and culture into a single system was further developed by medieval thinkers such as John Poinsot. In the modern era, John Locke formalised the term 'semiotike' in the 17th century, proposing it as one of the core branches of science alongside natural philosophy and ethics. Locke emphasised the role of signs in human knowledge and communication, anticipating many of the questions later addressed by structuralists and pragmatists. Saussure, working independently of Peirce, proposed semiology as a science of signs within social life. His emphasis on the structural relationships within language—particularly the arbitrary but rule-governed nature of signs—helped launch structuralism in the 20th century. Saussure's dyadic model centred on the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept), with meaning generated not by reference to reality but through differences between signs within a system. Semiotics later expanded beyond its linguistic roots. Thinkers like Umberto Eco viewed all culture as communication, asserting that any human practice could be interpreted semiotically. Semiotics now encompasses domains such as zoosemiotics (animal signs), phytosemiotics (plant signalling), and biosemiotics—the study of sign processes in all forms of life. These fields demonstrate how organisms adapt to and interpret their environments through structured sign systems. As an interdisciplinary science, semiotics bridges philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, and biology. It does not impose meaning but investigates how meaning emerges through social and natural interactions. Whether studying myth, fashion, architecture, or cellular signalling, semiotics reveals the patterned processes through which life is continuously interpreted and reinterpreted. Peirce's and Saussure's divergent frameworks—pragmatic and structural—form the twin pillars of a discipline that continues to illuminate the conditions of meaning across cultures and species.

What is a sign?

In 1894, Charles Sanders Peirce laid the foundation for modern semiotics by asserting that all reasoning depends on interpreting signs. To understand how humans think, Peirce began by identifying three fundamental mental states—feeling, reaction, and thought—each corresponding to his broader philosophical categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Feeling is an unmediated experience, a moment of pure presence, such as contemplating the

colour red without naming or analysing it. This state is rare in waking life but reveals the mind's capacity for direct sensation. Reaction occurs when the self encounters resistance from the world, as in being startled by a loud noise. It signifies a forceful interruption, grounding awareness. Thought, in contrast, connects causes and effects through general rules. Observing that a noise starts when a door closes and stops when it opens, a person begins to reason. This triadic structure—uniting sensation, resistance, and mediation—underpins Peirce's theory of signs. A sign, for Peirce, is anything that mediates between an object and its interpretation. He distinguishes three classes of signs based on how they relate to their objects: icons, indices, and symbols. Icons represent through resemblance. A photograph, a realistic drawing, or a diagram shares visible similarity with what it depicts. Icons are essential for imagination, analogy, and the beginnings of communication, particularly when language is absent. In mathematics, visual models help clarify relationships; early human writing systems used pictorial icons to express ideas. Indices point to their referents through direct physical or causal connection. Smoke signals fire, a weather vane shows wind direction, and a pointing finger or footprint reveals a presence. Indices are context-dependent and anchored in real-world phenomena, allowing signs to reference specific locations, moments, or actions. They do not rely on interpretation but function automatically within a given physical situation. Symbols, the most abstract of the three, represent through social convention. Words do not resemble their referents, nor are they physically connected to them. Their meaning depends on shared usage, history, and agreement within a linguistic community. Symbols are inherently general and evolve over time, enabling complex reasoning, cultural transmission, and conceptual abstraction. They are the primary tools of language and logic, but they must often be grounded in the immediacy of indices and the intuition of icons to be meaningful. Peirce emphasised that all signs function within a triadic process that includes the sign itself, its object, and the interpretant—the effect or meaning produced in the mind of the interpreter. Icons give intuitive clarity, indices ground signs in empirical context, and symbols support generalisation and learning. Every act of reasoning involves this dynamic combination. For Peirce, thinking is not separate from signs but is itself a process of semiosis—the interpretation of signs unfolding over time. He likened this process to a living organism, where indices are the skeletal structure, icons the blood that animates, and symbols the evolutionary memory of human thought. In this way, signs are not merely passive representations but active forces shaping the understanding of reality itself.

Of reasoning in general

In his 1895 essay 'Of Reasoning in General', Charles Sanders Peirce presents reasoning as both a natural and logical process inseparable from the use and interpretation of signs. Reasoning is not a passive reception of impressions, but an active construction of beliefs based on prior knowledge. For Peirce, logic is the science of this process, and reasoning is its central mechanism. All thought, he insists, takes place through signs, and every reasoning act depends on their proper combination and interpretation. Peirce classifies signs into three categories: icons, indices, and symbols. Icons represent their objects through resemblance—a diagram, for instance, stands in for a spatial relationship. Indices are physically connected to what they signify, like smoke indicating fire or a thermometer pointing to temperature. Symbols, by contrast, are signs established by learnt conventions and sustained through communal agreement—language, mathematical notation, and cultural symbols fall into this category. While icons and indices can support understanding, only symbols allow for assertions, propositions, and rational discourse. The interplay of these signs makes reasoning possible. Peirce describes reasoning as a triadic process where symbols synthesise the intuitive clarity of icons and the referential certainty of indices. An assertion like 'X loves Y' uses indices to refer

to people and an iconic representation of affection, but it only becomes a proposition through symbolic structure. Reasoning thus entails assembling signs, comparing propositions (colligation), and isolating relationships (contemplation) to produce valid conclusions. Peirce distinguishes between demonstrative and experiential reasoning. Demonstrative reasoning, as in mathematics, proceeds through internal consistency and symbolic manipulation, allowing for repeatability and minimisation of error. Experiential reasoning deals with the external world, seeking regularities and forming laws from observation. This latter kind is always provisional, open to revision as new data emerges. At the core of Peirce's theory is his doctrine of perceptual judgment. Every cognitive act begins with perception, which is always singular but never devoid of generality. Even in a momentary sensation—such as seeing a bird fly across the sky—there is already a conceptual framing. Generality resides not in the singular perception but in the predicate applied to it, which can be extended to other cases. This blend of the singular and the general underpins reasoning and makes universal propositions possible. Peirce identifies three modes of reasoning: deduction, induction, and abduction. Deduction derives necessary consequences from given premises. Induction confirms generalisations by repeated experience. Abduction, the most creative and risky form, generates explanatory hypotheses by intuiting probable causes. While less certain, abduction is vital for innovation, enabling the leap from observation to theory. It is through abduction that reasoning approaches discovery. Ultimately, Peirce fuses logic with pragmatism. Meaning, he argues, lies in the practical effects of concepts—what they do in experience. This pragmatic maxim grounds reasoning in lived consequences. All knowledge, for Peirce, stems from perceptual judgments interpreted through signs, leading to hypotheses that guide further inquiry. Reasoning is thus an evolving process—a dynamic engagement between signs, perception, and understanding—that defines both logic and human intelligence.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin

(Dialogism and the open text: Bakhtin's vision of language as event)

'The meaning of a text is not something hidden behind the words. It is something that emerges through the act of reading'.

— Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method

'Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction'.

— M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination

The Problem of the Text in Linguistics

In 'The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences', Mikhail Bakhtin challenges conventional understandings of language and text by emphasising the inherently dialogic nature of all human communication. Unlike traditional linguistic approaches that isolate language into static systems of signs or codes, Bakhtin insists that texts are living events—utterances situated within dynamic, responsive relationships between speakers, listeners, and broader cultural forces. For Bakhtin, the text is not merely an object to be interpreted but a moment of interaction, shaped by multiple voices and directed toward multiple audiences. Every utterance, he argues, is inherently oriented toward an 'other', making it

dialogic in nature, and every text exists in a web of ongoing communication. Bakhtin introduces the idea of the 'superaddressee'—a third party beyond the immediate speaker and listener who silently witnesses and judges the exchange. This superaddressee could be society, God, posterity, or an ideal reader. The presence of this imagined other highlights how communication is never private or closed; it always contains an excess of meaning not fully exhausted in the moment of dialogue. The utterance anticipates future interpretations and carries traces of past uses. In this way, texts are open, unfinalizable, and shaped by temporal and social forces. They exist not in a vacuum but in relation to other texts, voices, and expectations. Rather than treating language as a system of signs governed by internal rules—as Ferdinand de Saussure and structuralists proposed—Bakhtin argues for a pragmatic and situated view of discourse. Meaning is not generated solely through formal structures but through the interaction of real speakers in real contexts. Linguistics and philology, he suggests, too often neglect the concrete event of utterance. By contrast, the human sciences must account for the relational, cultural, and temporal dimensions of language, which can only be grasped through dialogue and interpretation. Bakhtin further criticises what he calls the 'monologisation' of experience—the attempt to reduce language to a single authoritative voice or meaning. He argues that every text is inherently polyphonic, containing multiple voices, perspectives, and intentions. Even a seemingly singular voice is shaped by the speech of others: prior usage, anticipated responses, and socially encoded expectations. This dialogism resists attempts to close meaning or enforce ideological closure. Instead, Bakhtin champions a view of language as participatory, open-ended, and ethically charged—always engaged in the give-and-take of meaning-making. The text, for Bakhtin, is not a product to be consumed but a process of becoming, an encounter between consciousnesses. Its interpretation is never complete, because it always exceeds the control of both the author and the reader. In this light, the study of language, literature, and culture must move beyond static analysis toward a model that honours the dialogic reality of human understanding. Bakhtin's vision of the text as an event of dialogue opens a radical path for linguistics and the human sciences. It situates meaning not in isolated systems but in living interaction, transforming the act of reading, writing, and speaking into a deeply ethical and social practice.

The Dialogical Principle

Tzvetan Todorov's presentation[112] of Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy clarifies a fundamental distinction between two approaches to language: linguistics and what Bakhtin calls 'translinguistics'. Linguistics, rooted in Saussurean structuralism, treats language as a self-contained system of signs and rules, isolating syntax, morphology, and vocabulary from their social use. This abstraction allows for precision but removes language from its living context. In contrast, translinguistics focuses on utterances—speech acts situated in time, history, and interaction. For Bakhtin, the utterance is not merely a grammatical sentence but a socially embedded event, irreducible to repetition or general rule. Its meaning arises in dialogue, not in isolation. Bakhtin sees the utterance as the central unit of discourse. Unlike language, which is repeatable, utterances are unrepeatable, bound to specific speakers, listeners, moments, and intentions. The utterance does not merely transmit a pre-existing message but is created through interaction. Translation, then, is not the decoding of static content but a new utterance shaped by a different context. This impossibility of full repetition or translation underscores the

[112]Tzvetan Todorov (1998). Mikhail Bakhtin : the dialogical principle. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press.

uniqueness of human communication and the necessity of interpretation. Meaning is not discovered but constructed. Thus, the human sciences, unlike the natural sciences, must always grapple with irreducible particularity. Bakhtin contrasts his dialogical model of communication with Roman Jakobson's linear scheme of sender-message-receiver. For Bakhtin, communication is not transmission but interaction. Meaning is co-produced, not encoded. The speaker, listener, object, and language all emerge through dialogue, shaped by prior utterances and anticipated responses. Jakobson's model isolates 'contact' as a technical function, whereas Bakhtin introduces 'intertextuality'—the recognition that every utterance is shaped by and responds to previous ones. No speech is original; all language is inhabited. Even inner speech is dialogic, reflecting remembered voices or imagined responses. Central to Bakhtin's theory is intertextuality, a concept later refined by Julia Kristeva. Intertextuality denotes the embeddedness of every utterance in a field of other utterances. Unlike linguistic relations of grammar or logic, intertextual relations are semantic, cultural, and historical. An utterance is always oriented toward a listener and shaped by previous discourse. It carries traces of past usage and anticipates future replies. This dialogic web constitutes meaning. Even so-called monologic texts contain multiple voices, ideologies, and perspectives. The novel, for Bakhtin, is the supreme expression of intertextuality. It thrives on polyphony—many voices—and embraces heteroglossia, the clash of different languages and values. Genres differ in their openness to dialogue. Prose, especially the novel, incorporates conflicting discourses, while poetry often isolates itself in aesthetic form. The representation of discourse itself also varies: some texts are single-voiced, where one perspective dominates; others are two-voiced or hybrid, embedding irony, parody, or dual intention. These structures are not formal tricks but reflections of dialogic reality. All speech is shaped by cultural struggle. Even simple utterances carry ideological weight. Bakhtin's philosophy of language thus redefines meaning as fundamentally relational. Words are not static containers but positions in a social dialogue. Meaning does not reside in the word alone, nor in the speaker's intent, but in the encounter between speaker, listener, and prior discourse. This encounter is always mediated by history, ideology, and power. The text is never closed, never final. Its interpretation is always provisional, shaped by the dialogic interplay of voices over time. This dialogical principle challenges any attempt to reduce language to mere code or message. It requires that one see communication not as mechanical exchange but as ethical encounter. In this view, language is not a neutral medium but a field of tension and interaction, where meaning is constantly renegotiated. Tzvetan Todorov's presentation of Bakhtin reveals the philosophical depth of this vision—one that remains essential for understanding human discourse, literature, and society.

Speech Genres and Text

Speech genres, as conceptualised by Mikhail Bakhtin, are fundamental to understanding how language operates across the spectrum of human communication. Every sphere of life—be it domestic, scientific, political, or literary—generates its own typical forms of expression. These relatively stable forms of utterance are known as speech genres, and they develop in direct response to the specific needs, conditions, and goals of each communicative domain. While their surface features may vary widely, they all participate in the broader unity of language as a national or social phenomenon. Bakhtin distinguishes between two principal types of speech genres: primary (or simple) and secondary (or complex). Primary genres arise in spontaneous, everyday interaction—greetings, casual conversations, or instructions. These genres are closely tied to immediate reality and require no extended composition or reflection. Secondary genres, on the other hand, are developed in more structured, cultural contexts—novels, scientific reports, philosophical treatises. These absorb and reshape primary genres,

embedding them in more complex and reflective discourse. For example, a dialogue in a novel mirrors everyday conversation but is layered with narrative intention and ideological positioning. What differentiates speech genres from abstract linguistic units is their status as complete, socially situated utterances. While a sentence may serve as a building block of grammar, an utterance is a whole unit of communication, complete with a speaker, an addressee, and a purpose. Each utterance is marked by its beginning and end, often determined by a shift in speakers. It encapsulates not just semantic content but a particular intention, emotional tone, and compositional structure. It is these features that allow the utterance to participate in a chain of communication—responding to previous speech and anticipating future replies. Speech genres are inherently dialogic. No utterance exists in a vacuum; each is a response to something and anticipates a reaction. This responsiveness ties speech not only to language but also to social interaction, history, and ideology. The speaker's awareness of the listener shapes the style, tone, and structure of the utterance. Whether addressing a friend, a crowd, or an imagined authority, the speaker modifies their speech according to the anticipated response. Thus, communication is always a kind of dialogue—even when only one voice is heard. This perspective extends to the concept of text. A text, for Bakhtin, is not just a collection of sentences but a structured utterance, shaped by and responding to its dialogic environment. Texts are part of ongoing communicative chains and participate in wider cultural and ideological dialogues. The study of texts must therefore consider not only their internal linguistic features but also their external relationships—with other texts, with readers, and with the cultural situations from which they emerge. Bakhtin's theory challenges any static view of language. It insists that meaning arises not from the internal logic of words alone but from their use in social contexts. Genres mediate between language and life, enabling people to communicate meaningfully in different settings. Recognising the role of speech genres in shaping utterances and texts reveals how deeply language is embedded in social life and how dialogue is the foundation of human expression.

From word to culture

Mikhail Bakhtin viewed language not as a fixed system of signs, but as a living, evolving medium shaped by social interaction and historical change. For him, the word is never neutral or solitary—it always carries traces of previous usage, past voices, and earlier contexts. Words pass from mouth to mouth, generation to generation, culture to culture, always marked by the dialogic encounters they undergo. In this movement, a word gathers social resonance and becomes an active participant in shaping consciousness, culture, and meaning. Bakhtin emphasises that the moment a person speaks, they inherit words that have already been used, already 'inhabited' by others. These words are not received in isolation; they arrive saturated with the intonations, judgments, and aspirations of prior users. As such, any attempt to speak or write becomes an act of reorientation—repositioning words within a new context while still echoing the old. This dialogic view sees language not as the expression of a solitary mind but as a meeting ground of multiple perspectives, voices, and intentions. For Bakhtin, the essence of speech lies in this relational dynamic. Every utterance is shaped not only by the speaker's intent but also by the anticipated response of others. Meaning is not transmitted as a fixed message but co-created through interaction. This principle defines his concept of dialogism: all communication unfolds as a response to prior utterances and in anticipation of future replies. Even when someone speaks seemingly alone, they address an internalised other, an imagined audience or adversary. There is no absolute beginning in speech—only continuation. This understanding of language has profound implications for the study of literature and culture. In literary texts, particularly novels, Bakhtin identifies what he calls heteroglossia—the presence of multiple speech types, worldviews, and ideological positions within a single work. Novels,

unlike poetic or monologic forms, can represent language itself as a subject. They dramatise the tension between official, authoritative speech and unofficial, everyday voices. In doing so, the novel becomes a site where culture reflects on its own language practices. Bakhtin also draws attention to the word as a cultural artefact. Words are not only shaped by their speakers but also structure how speakers think and relate to the world. A word is an 'ideological sign', expressing values and beliefs embedded in a community. It is not merely a vehicle for meaning but a space where meaning is contested, negotiated, and transformed. This makes language the most sensitive register of cultural life. Moreover, Bakhtin's thought resists finality. He insists that no word ever achieves a complete or final meaning. Language remains open-ended, with every utterance inviting further response. This vision opposes any authoritarian closure of discourse, whether in politics, art, or theory. It affirms the possibility of renewal and reinterpretation in every act of communication. Ultimately, Bakhtin's theory of the word dissolves the boundaries between linguistics, philosophy, art, and culture. From word to culture, meaning is dialogic, historical, and relational. Language, as he saw it, is the unfinished conversation of humanity.

Roland Gérard Barthes

(Beyond the author: Text as tissue of quotations)

'Every text is a mosaic of quotations; every text is the absorption and transformation of another'.

— Julia Kristeva, Word, Dialogue and Novel

'Language is legislation, speech is its code. We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive'.

— Roland Barthes

The death of the author

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was a French literary theorist, philosopher, and semiotician who radically transformed the study of language, literature, and culture. Beginning with his early resistance to existentialist literary criticism, Barthes developed an approach that saw language not as a transparent tool of meaning but as a structure governed by codes, conventions, and cultural ideology. His work forms a bridge from structuralism to post-structuralism, with central focus on how meaning is produced, manipulated, and consumed. In 'Writing Degree Zero' (1953), Barthes challenged the existentialist ideal of sincerity in literature. He claimed that writing is never neutral; it exists within social and linguistic systems. While a writer may attempt innovation, their work quickly becomes conventional once adopted by others. Barthes stressed that 'writing' is distinct from style or language—it is a practice that must constantly resist ossification. Barthes deepened this critique in 'Mythologies' (1957), where he applied semiotic analysis to everyday cultural objects. From wrestling matches to food and advertising, he exposed how bourgeois ideology naturalises arbitrary signs into cultural myths. Drawing on Saussurean linguistics, he described how a first-order sign (a literal object or image) is transformed into a second-order myth (a socially coded meaning). For instance, a photograph of a French soldier saluting the flag might signify patriotism, but Barthes showed how this image disguises ideology beneath the illusion of truth. While structuralism offered tools to

dissect these systems of meaning, Barthes came to question its limitations. In 'The Fashion System', he analysed how language constructs fashion, revealing the artificiality of its rules. Yet he recognised that even this analytical language risked becoming another form of myth-making. The influence of post-structuralist thinkers, particularly Jacques Derrida, led Barthes to reject the idea of stable meanings or foundational truths. This shift is most famously articulated in 'The Death of the Author' (1967), where Barthes argued that meaning does not reside in the author's intention but emerges in the reader's engagement with the text. The author, he claimed, is a modern invention, used to anchor interpretation and repress plurality. By dethroning the author, Barthes opened the text to multiple, shifting meanings and liberated readers from imposed authority. Barthes described the text as a 'tissue of quotations', composed of fragments drawn from multiple cultural sources rather than a singular personal voice. The author, in this framework, becomes a 'scriptor', someone who merely assembles language without a privileged authority over its interpretation. The moment a text is written, the author's authority dissolves; meaning now belongs to language and the reader's response. This is not merely a literary provocation but a radical assertion of interpretive freedom. By refusing to locate a final meaning in the figure of the author, Barthes liberates the reader from the expectation of uncovering some hidden message and instead invites multiple, even conflicting interpretations. This argument has broader implications. It undermines traditional notions of authorship as a fixed identity tied to genius or intention. It also critiques the idea of a stable truth behind the text, encouraging readers to explore ambiguity, contradiction, and plurality. While Barthes was not the first to suggest such ideas—echoes can be found in modernist literature, Surrealist practice, and linguistic theory—his articulation remains one of the most influential statements of reader-centred interpretation. For Barthes, writing becomes an open field, no longer constrained by the figure of the Author-God, but made alive by the play of meaning in the hands of readers.

The Pleasure of the Text

In 'The Pleasure of the Text' (1973), Roland Barthes explores the intimate experience of reading, distinguishing between two types of textual enjoyment: pleasure and bliss. These terms do not merely describe reader responses but reflect fundamentally different relationships between text and reader. Pleasure is associated with the 'readerly' text—predictable, familiar, and aligned with dominant codes and conventions. It offers comfort, coherence, and confirms the reader's identity. Bliss, however, arises from the 'writerly' text, which disrupts expectations, destabilises language, and produces a visceral, even ecstatic, response. Such texts fracture the reader's subjectivity, evoking moments of intensity, loss, and transformation. Barthes contrasts these modes not simply to elevate one over the other but to reveal how literature operates on various levels—sometimes affirming the world and the self, sometimes dissolving them. The 'readerly' text leaves the reader as a passive consumer, whereas the 'writerly' text invites active co-creation. In reading a writerly text, the reader becomes a participant in the production of meaning, not simply a recipient. This process involves engaging with the play of codes—symbolic, cultural, hermeneutic—and embracing their instability. A text, for Barthes, is never self-contained; it is a 'tissue of quotations', a woven web of references and voices from across history and culture. The corporeal dimension of reading is central to Barthes's theory. He imagines reading as a sensual, erotic act, where language touches the body through rhythm, voice, and sound. The pleasure of the text is not only intellectual but also physical. This emphasis on embodiment challenges the idea that reading is merely interpretation—it becomes affective, unpredictable, and often transgressive. Barthes celebrates the text's ability to subvert norms, revealing how language can exceed ideology and reason. By rejecting linear argument

and embracing a fragmented, aphoristic form, 'The Pleasure of the Text' performs what it theorises. Its structure refuses the logic of system and instead models the experience of bliss in its very language. For Barthes, meaning is not imposed from above but emerges in the space between reader and text, in the act of reading itself. Ultimately, Barthes offers not a guide to literature but an invitation: to read differently, to feel language on the skin, to lose and remake the self through textual encounter. His work suggests that the future of reading lies not in mastery or explanation, but in vulnerability, disruption, and the openness to unexpected pleasures.

Empire of Signs

Roland Barthes's 'Empire of Signs' invites readers to encounter a language—not to comprehend or master it, but to experience its resistance, its strangeness, its otherness. For Barthes, the foreign language, particularly Japanese, serves as a mirror that reflects the limits of Western thought and discourse. It is not the utility of communication he seeks, but the unfamiliar terrain where meaning fails to map onto language, where translation becomes betrayal. In this linguistic wilderness, the foundations of one's own language—its categories, its subject-object dualities, its syntactic presuppositions—begin to collapse. This collapse is not a loss but an opening, a destabilisation of what is taken for granted as natural or rational. To know the unknown language is to unlearn one's own. In the Japanese language, Barthes observes, speech does not build from a centred subject who commands discourse. Instead, meaning diffuses through grammatical particles, honorifics, and structural indeterminacy. The subject appears only by indirection, delayed and refracted. The sentence becomes not a linear proposition but a textured surface—a language with volume rather than depth. Fictional characters, too, are not animated by illusion but remain within the frame of signs, reminding readers that narrative is a system of marks, not life. Barthes extends this estrangement of meaning to Zen practice and aesthetics. Zen defies the compulsive Western habit of signification. It does not offer revelation or closure, but confrontation with linguistic limits. Its use of paradox, koans, and haiku suspends the machinery of classification. A haiku does not say more than it seems to; it says less. Its beauty lies in its refusal to become symbolic, in the purity of its form, in its closure that is not depth but silence. The sound of a frog jumping into water, for Basho, is not metaphor but event—a moment where language folds into stillness. The experience of immersion in an unknown culture, especially where language remains opaque, becomes a refuge from the tyranny of meaning. The foreigner, protected by linguistic ignorance, walks in a world of signifiers unburdened by messages. A smile, a gesture, the ritual of bodily presence—these replace speech, and meaning arises from form, rhythm, interaction, not from words. Communication occurs not through semantic transparency but through the play of surfaces, expressions, and cultural codes embodied in the flesh. This is the empire of signs: not a place, but a network of signs detached from fixed reference, where the subject is no longer sovereign, where language is not the mirror of truth but a shimmering field of play. Barthes's Japanese is a fiction—constructed, symbolic, unreal—and yet, in its unreality, it reveals the artificiality of all linguistic systems. It shows how deeply people are imprisoned by their own codes, and how freedom might lie not in discovering meaning, but in its suspension. In this empire, to read is to dwell in signification without mastery, to drift among gestures, fragments, and silences that escape the grip of interpretation.

2.3. Universal grammar and divine speech

Avram Noam Chomsky

(Inborn syntax: Mind, language, and the rules within)

'A grammar of any language is a theory of human language'.

— Noam Chomsky, Aspects of the Theory of Syntax

'A language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in a language'.

— Noam Chomsky, We Still Live Here

Universal Grammar: An Overview

Universal Grammar (UG) is a central theory in modern linguistics, primarily developed by Noam Chomsky, which proposes that the capacity for language is innate and biologically embedded in the human mind. According to UG, humans are born with a set of universal structural principles that underlie all natural languages. These principles serve as constraints on possible grammatical systems, allowing children to acquire complex language rules quickly and with limited exposure. The theory is built on the idea that despite the diversity of languages, their core structures derive from a shared cognitive framework. While UG has profoundly influenced linguistic theory, it remains the subject of ongoing debate and critique. At the heart of UG is the 'poverty of the stimulus' argument, which claims that the linguistic input children receive is insufficient to explain the sophisticated grammatical competence they develop. For example, children learning English can form questions by moving auxiliary verbs, demonstrating an implicit grasp of hierarchical syntactic structure rather than simple linear patterns. This suggests the presence of an inborn template guiding language acquisition. Chomsky's solution to this puzzle is the postulation of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), a mental mechanism that enables children to infer the rules of grammar from limited input. Various models have been proposed to explain the content and function of UG. The Minimalist Program, a recent development in Chomsky's thought, argues for a drastically reduced UG consisting of simple operations like 'merge', which combines linguistic units hierarchically. Other theories, such as Hagit Borer's Lexical Parameterisation and Optimality Theory, suggest that variation between languages results from different lexical items or ranked constraints, rather than differing grammatical principles. Despite their differences, these models share the conviction that human languages arise from a universal set of cognitive structures. Empirical evidence for UG is often drawn from language acquisition, typology, and creole formation. Derek Bickerton's language bioprogram theory argues that creole languages—emerging from pidgins—show convergent grammatical features, suggesting an underlying universal structure supplied by child learners. However, more recent research indicates that this convergence may reflect cognitive strategies for regularising inconsistent input rather than innate grammar. Neuroscientific studies also provide partial support: imaging experiments show that the brain processes hierarchical syntactic structures, consistent with UG's predictions. Yet computational models in artificial intelligence have demonstrated that complex linguistic behaviour can sometimes emerge from general-purpose learning algorithms, calling into question whether specific innate structures are necessary. Criticism of UG has grown, especially from

functionalist and usage-based perspectives. Critics argue that the theory underestimates the role of interaction, frequency, and general cognitive mechanisms in language learning. The wide variety of linguistic structures found across the world challenges the idea of strict universals. Some researchers also question UG's falsifiability and accuse it of being too insulated from empirical testing. The case of the Pirahã language, studied by Daniel Everett, has been especially contentious, as it appears to lack features thought to be universal, such as recursion. Despite such challenges, UG remains a foundational concept in linguistic theory, particularly within the generative tradition. It has reshaped how scholars think about the mind, cognition, and the nature of language. Whether future research confirms or significantly revises UG, its legacy is assured as one of the most ambitious attempts to explain the human capacity for language in scientific terms.

Logical structure of linguistic theory

Noam Chomsky's 'The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory' (LSLT), written in 1955 but unpublished until decades later, is the theoretical foundation behind his landmark publication 'Syntactic Structures'(1957). Although most readers were unaware of LSLT when 'Syntactic Structures' appeared, its rigor and depth lent an aura of authority to Chomsky's early claims. One of LSLT's key contributions lies in its reconceptualization of the goals of linguistic theory. Rather than merely cataloguing the grammatical sentences of a language, Chomsky proposed that linguistic theory should explain the deeper structure of language by establishing formal mechanisms capable of generating those sentences. LSLT introduced the tripartite division of grammar into phrase structure rules, transformational rules, and morphophonemic rules. This model framed language as a generative system, capable of producing an infinite variety of sentences from a finite set of rules and principles. In this framework, language becomes a mirror of the mind, and syntax—a computational system—becomes central to understanding cognition. One of the phenomena LSLT addresses is constructional homonymity, where identical phoneme sequences correspond to different underlying structures. For example, the phrase 'the shooting of the hunters' is structurally ambiguous. Its interpretation requires a transformational analysis that can trace the surface phrase back to distinct kernel sentences—either 'the hunters shoot' or 'they shoot the hunters'. Such insights reveal that multiple levels of representation are needed to explain even seemingly simple utterances. This layered architecture—phonemic, morphemic, syntactic, and transformational—enables linguistics to account for ambiguity, similarity, and sentence classification within a coherent formal system. LSLT also engages with the relationship between syntax and semantics but resists collapsing the two into a unified analysis. Chomsky insists that syntax must be developed independently of meaning. He demonstrates that many grammatical structures, such as auxiliaries in questions ('Did John eat?') or function words ('to' in 'to go'), do not carry semantic content in any straightforward sense. Moreover, semantically similar sentences may differ structurally, and vice versa, suggesting that syntactic competence cannot be explained solely by appeal to meaning. Instead, syntax should be treated as an autonomous, rule-governed domain that indirectly supports semantic interpretation. Chomsky's emphasis on formalism and explanatory adequacy in LSLT paved the way for the generative tradition in linguistics. The transformational component of his grammar allowed for deep and surface structures to be linked systematically, and the concept of kernel sentences provided a base from which complex constructions could be derived. These innovations laid the groundwork for future developments such as government and binding theory and the minimalist program. Though LSLT remained unpublished for decades, its intellectual impact was immediate through 'Syntactic Structures', which distilled its main arguments into a more accessible form. The criticisms about originality

and mathematical rigour do not diminish LSLT's profound influence on shaping modern linguistics. It provided the tools and theoretical framework that continue to guide the formal analysis of language today, securing its place as a foundational text in the generative tradition.

Language and mind

Noam Chomsky's 'Language and Mind' presents a foundational view of human language as a formal, innate system deeply embedded in cognitive structures. Chomsky distinguishes between linguistic competence—the internalised knowledge of grammatical rules—and linguistic performance, or how language is used in real contexts, often affected by external factors like memory limitations or social context. Linguistic theory, according to Chomsky, should focus on competence: the mental grammar that enables the pairing of sound and meaning, not just the messy outcomes of speech in everyday life. This internal grammar is structured, rule-governed, and universal. Human languages, despite surface differences, share deep structural similarities governed by universal grammar (UG). UG consists of innate principles that constrain and guide the possible forms a language can take. These principles manifest in phonetics, semantics, and syntax. In phonetics, features like voicing or tongue position are used to construct a universal sound alphabet. In semantics, features such as animacy or agency contribute to meaning. In syntax, deep and surface structures represent the abstract and concrete layers of sentence formation. Chomsky introduces the concepts of deep and surface structures to explain how language operates across multiple levels. Deep structures represent core semantic relationships (like subject and object), while surface structures reflect their expression in speech or writing. For example, 'John is certain that Bill will leave' and 'John is certain to leave' differ in surface structure, but their deeper logical relations are distinguishable through grammatical analysis. Transformations—formal operations that derive surface forms from deep structures—are key to generative grammar. These transformations help account for sentence variations, ambiguity, and meaning. A generative grammar includes syntactic, phonological, and semantic components. The syntactic component generates deep and surface structures; the phonological component converts structures into sound patterns; and the semantic component interprets meaning. Each component follows formal rules, often applied cyclically to progressively larger units, revealing language's recursive and hierarchical nature. These rule-governed systems are evidence of innate cognitive architecture, not just learnt behaviour. Language acquisition, Chomsky argues, depends on the child's ability to select the correct grammar from among many possibilities, using limited and imperfect input. This feat, often referred to as the 'poverty of the stimulus', suggests that children must possess built-in grammatical knowledge—principles of UG—that guide interpretation and rule formation. The implications of Chomsky's theory extend beyond linguistics into philosophy. Questions about mind, knowledge, and meaning intersect with grammatical structure. The interplay between surface and deep structures reflects deeper philosophical issues of reference, belief, and cognitive architecture. While some philosophers like Zeno Vendler have proposed that linguistic theory might offer tools for analytic philosophy, Chomsky is cautious, seeing more value in linguistic findings informing philosophical inquiries than in linguistics serving as a direct method for philosophy. Ultimately, 'Language and Mind' underscores the rationalist view that the mind contains innate structures that shape human understanding. Language becomes not only a tool for communication but a window into the nature of thought, revealing the deep cognitive principles that make understanding and expression possible.

The Linguistics Wars

Language is both miraculous and elusive—a means by which humans express the most intricate thoughts and construct the most powerful technologies, yet also something so natural that it seems to flow unconsciously, as if by inspiration. This paradox sits at the centre of 'The Linguistics Wars', a history of one of the most contentious intellectual episodes of the twentieth century. Randy Allen Harris chronicles the split that emerged in the 1960s and 70s within the field of generative linguistics, where former allies turned into fierce opponents in a debate that pitted syntax against semantics, and structure against meaning. At the centre of the story is Noam Chomsky, who revolutionised the field by introducing the concept of deep structure. This was the idea that all human languages share an underlying, abstract grammar rooted in the human mind—a generative system capable of producing an infinite number of meaningful sentences. Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar formalised this process by distinguishing between deep structure (the logical, abstract basis of a sentence) and surface structure (its realised, spoken form). Language, for Chomsky, was primarily a computational system of rules, and meaning arose only after syntactic operations had applied. Opposing this model were the Generative Semanticists, led by George Lakoff and others, who argued that meaning was not a byproduct of syntax but its foundation. In their view, deep structures were themselves conceptual—representations of meaning out of which syntax emerged. This reversal of Chomsky's model led to a dramatic confrontation over the nature of language, one that questioned whether linguistic form is shaped by logic and computation or by conceptual and semantic content. The disputes were as personal as they were theoretical. Former students of Chomsky, including Lakoff, broke away from their mentor's paradigm, accusing him of dogmatism and authoritarianism. The arguments extended beyond syntax and semantics into broader issues such as the nature of scientific theory, the role of meaning in cognition, and the very purpose of linguistic analysis. The rift even played out in the pages of scholarly journals, classroom debates, and conference panels, where linguistic arguments often served as proxies for deeper philosophical divisions. One core issue was the 'Katz-Postal Hypothesis', named after Jerrold Katz and Paul Postal, which posited that deep structure determined all semantic interpretation. This aligned with Chomsky's early views, but later he introduced refinements that allowed some semantic content to be derived at the surface, complicating the purity of the earlier model. For Generative Semanticists, this was a retreat; for Chomsky, it was a refinement. The result was an escalating debate over how to best model the relation between thought and language. These tensions were not merely academic. They reflected larger questions about human cognition: Is language an autonomous module in the brain governed by innate principles, or is it an expression of general intelligence, shaped by experience and cultural context? The Linguistics Wars dramatised this epistemological divide and ultimately reshaped the boundaries of linguistics itself. By the late 1970s, Chomsky's revised theory, known as the 'Government and Binding' model, had replaced his earlier transformational grammar. Generative Semantics faded from mainstream linguistics but left an enduring impact, particularly in cognitive science, where Lakoff and others continued exploring the role of metaphor and embodiment in shaping thought and language. The wars left scars but also yielded insights, demonstrating that even the most abstract theories are inseparable from the people and passions that produce them. In recounting this history, 'The Linguistics Wars' is not just a chronicle of intellectual combat—it is an inquiry into what language reveals about the human mind, and how competing visions of knowledge, truth, and meaning play out in the most human of all activities: speech. Wittgenstein said that one must remain silent about what cannot be spoken. At the top of that list,

paradoxically, is language itself. The first and final question of linguistics remains: how can one speak about language using language?

Umberto Eco

(Serendipities and echoes of Babel: Error and the dream of a perfect language)

'All attempts to construct a universal language are expressions of the same desire—to rediscover a lost harmony, a language of the angels'.

— Umberto Eco, The Search for the Perfect Language

'We are not told in what language God spoke to Adam… we must think of a language which… is still… comprehensible to its hearer'.

— Umberto Eco, The Search for the Perfect Language

Language and lunacy

'Serendipities: Language and Lunacy' is a 1998 collection of essays by Umberto Eco, exploring how false ideas have often led to unexpected truths. Translated by William Weaver, the book examines historical misconceptions in linguistics and the Early Modern search for a perfect language, overlapping thematically with Eco's earlier 'The Search for the Perfect Language'. In the preface, Eco defines 'serendipity' as the fortunate discovery born from error. Each chapter unpacks a different example: from Marco Polo mistaking a rhinoceros for a unicorn, to Leibniz interpreting the 'I Ching' as evidence of binary logic, to Joseph de Maistre's theological linguistics. Eco demonstrates how intellectual misreadings and absurd beliefs—while lacking credibility—have nevertheless sparked genuine insights. He traces the cultural mythologies surrounding the Rosicrucians, Knights Templar, and utopian languages, showing how human imagination reshapes the unknown through projection and misunderstanding. Columbus's accidental 'discovery' of the Americas becomes the prime metaphor: an error that revealed a new world. Through wit, irony, and vast erudition, Eco investigates how language, myth, and mistaken knowledge converge. 'Serendipities' is a brilliant meditation on the history of ideas, revealing how the path to truth often winds through illusion and how linguistic fantasies have shaped human understanding. Throughout history, language has often been shaped not only by rigorous analysis but also by error, invention, and illusion. Many of the most influential linguistic ideas have emerged from misunderstandings, fictional constructs, and speculative attempts to rediscover or recreate a perfect language. Despite their flaws, such efforts have offered valuable insights into how natural languages function and how humans relate to the idea of meaning itself. The belief in an original, divine language has driven centuries of linguistic speculation. Attempts to reconstruct the language of Paradise or Babel reflect a persistent hope that language once possessed absolute clarity and unity. These projects, though often rooted in theological or mythic traditions, reveal more about cultural imagination than historical fact. Even when misguided, they clarify why living, evolving languages—precisely because of their imperfections—are more adaptable and expressive than artificially constructed systems. Fictional languages, invented to parody or critique linguistic utopias, often expose the limitations of idealisation. They reflect anxieties about universality, control, and the desire for linguistic purity. At the same time, absurd or reactionary theories, including those based on mystical etymologies or ideological distortions, show how language can be manipulated to reinforce dogma or obscure meaning. Misreadings and mistranslations have

further distorted ideas about language's origins and structure. A poetic vision of a primordial tongue can be mistaken for theological certainty when filtered through flawed interpretations. This reveals how language is never fixed but always mediated by context, tools, and beliefs. The history of language is also the history of these distortions, reinterpretations, and projections. What appears foolish or erroneous in one era may provoke insight in another. Mistaken theories often illuminate the real conditions of linguistic change, adaptation, and survival. The very failure of perfect languages highlights the strengths of imperfect ones. The dynamic, shifting nature of language resists complete control or absolute definition, yet continues to serve as a powerful instrument of human thought and community. Ultimately, language is not only a means of communication but also a mirror of imagination, ideology, and cultural memory. It is shaped as much by myth and mistake as by clarity and logic. In this tension lies its enduring mystery and vitality.

The search for the perfect language

'The Search for the Perfect Language' (1993) is Umberto Eco's exploration of historical efforts to create an ideal, universal language. Framed through the myth of Babel, the book connects linguistic invention to broader social and cultural currents. Written in an essayistic style, it traces how the dream of a perfect language has always been entangled with ideological ambitions—religious, philosophical, and political. While acknowledging that this ultimately futile pursuit has led to occasional useful insights, Eco focuses primarily on the more curious and imaginative proposals that reflect humanity's persistent desire to overcome linguistic fragmentation. Language, in its mythic origin, begins not with humanity but with divinity. In Genesis, the first creative act is verbal—'Let there be light'. The universe is summoned into being through utterance, and the world is structured by naming. This divine speech implies that language precedes creation, functioning not as a human tool but as a sacred force. When Adam appears, he is invited into this divine function by naming the animals—an act both of language and of dominion. Whether Adam discovered their true names or invented them remains unclear. The ambiguity reflects a deeper tension in the human relationship to language: is it revelation or invention? Adam's naming of Eve—'ishha', or 'virago', and later 'Chava', 'mother of all living'—reinforces the sense that names once had direct ties to essence. Language, in its original form, was transparent, meaningful, and unified. But this unity is ruptured at Babel. In Genesis 11, humanity—still speaking one language—attempts to ascend to heaven by building a tower. The divine response is not only architectural disruption but linguistic confusion. God scatters speech itself, breaking the possibility of shared understanding. Babel becomes the myth of fragmentation—the 'confusio linguarum' that haunts all human attempts at perfect communication. Yet, Genesis 10 complicates this rupture. It already shows the postdiluvian world as linguistically diverse, suggesting that language change may also be natural, not purely punitive. This subtle dissonance reflects an ongoing human ambivalence: is linguistic multiplicity a curse or a richness? In classical thought, language was both a philosophical and political tool. While the Greeks dismissed foreign tongues as 'barbaroi', they also reflected on whether words are natural or arbitrary. Plato's 'Cratylus' and Aristotle's logic infused Greek with a privileged aura, later inherited by Latin. As empires expanded, language became a unifying code—koiné Greek and Latin serving to bind peoples under a common tongue. Later, Christian Europe sanctified the trilingual inscription on the Cross—Hebrew, Greek, and Latin—turning these into vessels of divine truth. Still, post-Roman fragmentation revived vernaculars and linguistic pluralism. Even this chaos inspired hope: Irish grammarians claimed their Gaelic to be a synthesis of all others, while mystics, cabalists, and humanists sought to retrieve or reconstruct Edenic speech. From medieval fantasies of Hebrew purity to

Enlightenment projects of logical languages, the desire for linguistic perfection remained. Universal languages were proposed to overcome ambiguity, unify knowledge, and eliminate misunderstanding. Some were symbolic, others gestural. All sought a language that would restore a lost unity between word and world. In modernity, this dream shifted into science. Monogenetic theories, genetic linguistics, and even artificial intelligence took up the search. Languages like Lincos, designed to communicate with extraterrestrials through mathematics and logic, carry forward the longing for a pure, universal code—unmediated by history, culture, or error. Yet this pursuit hides a dangerous paradox. The perfect language promises understanding, unity, even peace. But it also promises total transparency, surveillance, and control. A language without ambiguity is a language without resistance. When speech is fixed and meaning predetermined, freedom of interpretation vanishes. What begins as the desire to overcome Babel ends in the spectre of a single voice speaking for all. Thus, the perfect language is not merely a philosophical dream—it is also the blueprint for a perfect system of power. In its pursuit, humanity risks exchanging the chaos of misunderstanding for the tyranny of absolute clarity. What seems like utopia may instead be the architecture of total domination. The pursuit of a perfect language can be likened to the pursuit of the ultimate weapon—both aim for total precision, absolute control, and the elimination of ambiguity, often at the cost of freedom.

A Felix Culpa

For Umberto Eco, the myth of Babel, often interpreted as divine punishment for human pride, can instead be seen as a 'felix culpa'—a fortunate fall that opened the path to linguistic diversity and cultural richness. Rather than a loss, the confusion of tongues represents an opportunity: a call to explore, adapt, and understand the world in multiple ways. Language fragmentation becomes the source of creativity, not chaos. The myth reframed in this way celebrates the proliferation of languages as a necessary condition for the expansion of thought, identity, and mutual understanding. The gift of tongues, as described in the New Testament, deepens this reinterpretation. In 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of 'glossolalia'—a spiritual language transcending normal speech, while Acts offers the spectacle of 'xenoglossia', where each apostle speaks foreign tongues understood by all listeners. These accounts suggest a temporary return to pre-Babel unity, not by restoring a single language, but by allowing each person to be heard in their own. Rather than undoing diversity, the miracle honours it. Language becomes not a tower to collapse, but a bridge to build. This view aligns with the thinking of medieval thinkers like Ibn Hazm, who believed God originally gave humanity a perfect language. In this language, each thing had one name, and each name pointed clearly to its referent. Yet Ibn Hazm acknowledged linguistic ambiguity—not as a flaw, but as a feature. Synonyms and homonyms, when used properly, enriched rather than confused communication. He rejected the idea that languages formed by convention, insisting instead on a divinely given tongue from which all others descended. Importantly, the Qur’an treats the division of languages as natural, not punitive. All languages are seen as echoes of the original, and every tongue can express divine truth. Arabic, as the language of revelation, is not superior but fitting—chosen for a purpose, not for purity. This vision reframes multilingualism as a sacred legacy. The original language was not a single speech but a matrix—a potentiality for all possible languages. The story becomes one not of loss, but of unfolding: an infinite spectrum of speech gradually emerging from one luminous source. In this light, Adam’s role as the first speaker gains symbolic weight. His naming of the animals was not the completion of a linguistic task, but the beginning of an unfinished apprenticeship. The Fall interrupted his mastery of divine language, and the human condition became one of striving—trying to recover or recreate fragments of that original tongue. Each language, then, carries a sliver of the first, and every act of translation becomes a

small reconciliation between divided forms of truth. The Babel myth, reconsidered, does not call for erasing linguistic differences in the name of unity. It demands the opposite: honouring difference as the path to deeper unity. The 'curse' is the condition of possibility. The rupture becomes the origin of connection. A 'felix culpa'—fortunate because it multiplies the ways humanity can mean, understand, and share. In embracing linguistic plurality, people do not fall further from grace, but move closer to the divine richness embedded in human communication.

Computer languages as a priori systems

Umberto Eco, in 'The Search for the Perfect Language', examines the historical pursuit of a priori languages—systems constructed from foundational principles to achieve clarity and universality. Though he does not explicitly equate these philosophical languages with modern computer languages, his analysis offers a useful framework for understanding both. Whether ancient or contemporary, these constructed languages share a common goal: to create structured, logical systems for representing knowledge and facilitating precise communication. Eco's work highlights how the desire to overcome the ambiguities of natural language continues to shape linguistic invention, from theological speculation to computational design. Computer languages can be seen as modern echoes of the philosophical dream of a priori languages—systems built from foundational principles to ensure clarity, precision, and universality. Unlike natural languages, which evolve organically and are rich in ambiguity, metaphor, and cultural nuance, programming languages are engineered for exact interpretation. Their syntax is rigid, their semantics formal, and their structures—*if…then*, *while…do*—mirror logical deduction more than human dialogue. These languages achieve a limited universality: a Pascal program can be read and understood by programmers across cultures because it relies not on shared spoken language but on formal logic. In this sense, they avoid misunderstanding by design. Yet this clarity is achieved through severe constraints. Rooted in Western logical traditions, these languages are ill-suited to express ambiguity, metaphor, or emotional complexity. Their strength is also their blindness: what they omit is precisely what gives natural language its depth. The philosophical roots of this impulse run deep. From Boole and Frege to Russell and Wittgenstein, many sought languages that map reality with unerring accuracy. Logical positivists envisioned a purified language of science, while cognitive scientists proposed a 'mentalese', a code-like inner language mirroring computation. These ideals also shaped early AI and continue to influence efforts toward artificial general intelligence. Yet history warns that precision alone does not yield expressive power. Computer languages, though exact, remain bound to machines. They are not perfect languages, but the clearest manifestation yet of the human desire to master meaning through form. Seen this way, the search for a perfect language is not a return to Eden, but a dangerous temptation to reverse the very gift that Babel bestowed. To long for one language, pure and universal, is to risk erasing the diversity through which meaning thrives. A single, total language—like Adam's before the Fall—may seem divine, but imposed in a fallen world, it becomes a tool of domination. The more perfect the language, the greater its capacity to control, to exclude ambiguity, and to silence dissent. In this light, the desire for linguistic purity mirrors the desire for absolute power. What began as a sacred act of naming becomes, when completed too fully, a closing off possibility. The true inheritance of Babel is not confusion, but complexity—a reminder that language is not something to be perfected, but something to be lived with, translated, and continually reimagined.

3. CONSPIRACIES

3.1. Facts, biases, and hegemony

'Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.

— Louis Althusser, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses

'What we call facts are already interpretations'.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Facts

(When truth meets trust: The limits of facts)

Facts alone rarely persuade; they collide with our biases, identities, and social bonds. As Varol shows, objective data must be wrapped in dignity and psychological safety to be heard. Friendships then provide the trust bridge—beliefs shift not through debate but through relationships that humanise 'the other'. Moral convictions bend our perception of outcomes, aligning 'what is' with 'what ought to be'. Even the fact-checkers themselves operate within contested moral and political landscapes, reminding us that no arbiter of truth is beyond scrutiny. Ultimately, changing minds demands more than evidence: it calls for empathy, humility, and ongoing dialogue across divides. In a polarised world, our greatest asset is not better facts, but better connections.

Facts don't change minds[113]

In 'Facts Don't Change Minds. Here's What Does'(2017) Ozan Varol argue with the widely held belief that the best way to change someone's mind is to offer clear, objective facts. For a long time, this rationalist approach dominated public discourse: if only people had access to the correct information, they would update their beliefs accordingly. Yet time and experience have shown that this rarely happens. Facts, no matter how well-reasoned or data-driven, often fail to penetrate entrenched worldviews. As John Adams once said, 'Facts are stubborn things', but people's minds are far more resistant. The reason lies in a well-documented psychological phenomenon: confirmation bias. People naturally seek out information that supports what they already believe, while ignoring or dismissing contradictory evidence. This mental filter reinforces existing positions and shields identity from cognitive dissonance. Attempts to refute someone's position by presenting overwhelming data often backfire, making them more defensive and more convinced of their prior beliefs. To engage meaningfully and provoke actual change, one must appeal to more than logic. Offer the other person a way out that preserves dignity: Frame the shift in terms of updated information rather than past error. Allowing people to revise views without shame or blame creates psychological safety. Uncouple beliefs from identity: The more people see their ideas as extensions of their personal worth, the less likely they are to abandon them. Subtle linguistic shifts can reduce ego attachment and open the door

[113] Ozan Varol. (2017). Facts don't change people's minds. Here's what does. [online] Available at: https://ozanvarol.com/how-to-change-a-mind-yours-or-someone-elses/.

to revision. Understand the listener's values: Instead of restating your case louder or more often, tune your message to their concerns. Climate change facts might not move a factory worker worried about job security—but a story about green energy creating jobs for future generations might. Changing minds requires changing frames, not just repeating facts. Escape the echo chamber: Most people curate their media and relationships to avoid discomfort. Yet growth requires contact with the unfamiliar. Seek out dissenting voices, befriend those who challenge your perspective, and read opposing viewpoints not to dismiss but to learn. Intellectual humility is nourished in the friction between competing ideas. Facts alone do not change minds—but humility, listening, and trust can. In an age saturated with information, there is no need for more data, but more grace in how people speak and listen.

Friendships can change our minds

In the article[114] 'Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds—Friendships Do' human beings are seen not simply rational calculators, weighing facts in pursuit of truth. While reason plays a role in shaping beliefs, social belonging often plays a greater one. As economist J.K. Galbraith once remarked, most people would rather defend their beliefs than revise them—even in the face of overwhelming evidence. The desire to be right is powerful, but the desire to belong is even stronger. People cling to ideas not only because they believe them to be true, but because those ideas bind them to communities and relationships. Throughout history, bad ideas have persisted not because they are persuasive, but because they are socially useful. Conspicuous beliefs are signals of group loyalty. When someone repeats a falsehood, it may not be a sign of ignorance, but of allegiance. It is less about the content of the belief and more about what it communicates: 'I am one of you'. If adopting a belief secures social approval, the brain will accept it—regardless of whether it is true. This is why facts often fail to change minds. When people are presented with evidence that challenges their worldview, they experience it not as information, but as an attack on their identity. To revise a belief is to risk losing one's tribe. In this context, friendship becomes more powerful than logic. A person is far more likely to reconsider their position if the suggestion comes from someone they already trust, someone within their social world. We change not through argument, but through relationship. Friendships offer the emotional safety required for transformation. Spending time with someone who disagrees with you can soften prejudice and open space for understanding. This proximity humanises the other and undermines caricature. The process of belief change is incremental. People do not leap across ideological spectrums; they slide, often influenced by those already close to them. Books and quiet conversations are often more effective than debates, because they allow people to reflect without the need to defend their ego. A book does not argue—it waits. A friend does not attack—they invite. Ideas, both good and bad, spread through repetition. Most people behave like soldiers, trying to win arguments. The real victory lies in connection, not conversion. Changing minds is not a matter of being right—it is a matter of being kind first. The truth rarely wins through force. It travels on the fragile bridge of trust, built slowly, and carried by friendship.

[114] Clear, J. (2018). James Clear. [online] James Clear. Available at: https://jamesclear.com/why-facts-dont-change-minds.

Moral evaluations shape factual beliefs

According to research[115] by Brittany Liu and Peter H. Ditto 'What Dilemma? How Moral Evaluations Shape Factual Beliefs', people often sidestep moral dilemmas altogether by unconsciously aligning their perception of facts with their moral convictions. Moral dilemmas—whether in philosophy classrooms or real-world political debates—are often presented as stark choices between principles and outcomes. Should one sacrifice a single life to save many? Should society condone capital punishment if it might deter crime? These conflicts between deontological and consequentialist reasoning appear to demand a difficult choice between moral duty and practical outcome. Across three studies, they found that individuals routinely reshape their understanding of consequences to fit their moral beliefs. If a person believes a particular action is inherently wrong, they are also more likely to believe that the action will have negative outcomes. Conversely, if someone morally endorses an act, they will tend to view it as more beneficial and less harmful—even if objective evidence is lacking or contradictory. The first study used the classic trolley problem to examine how people judged the morality and efficacy of pushing one person to save five. Those who believed the action was morally wrong also rated it as more harmful and less effective. The second study extended this logic to real-world issues like capital punishment and stem cell research. Participants who found these acts immoral also believed they were less effective or more harmful, even in the absence of strong empirical data. The third study demonstrated that this causal relationship could be manipulated: reading moral arguments for or against capital punishment shifted participants' beliefs about its consequences, even when those consequences were never directly discussed. These results reveal a deep-seated human tendency toward 'motivated consequentialism'—the psychological alignment of facts with values. The process serves to reduce internal conflict. Instead of enduring the discomfort of a moral dilemma, individuals adjust the perceived facts to fit their convictions, reinforcing moral coherence and simplifying decision-making. This is not necessarily dishonest or deliberate but reflects how the mind naturally seeks harmony between belief and evidence. Importantly, the alignment was stronger among those with high moral conviction, greater self-reported knowledge, and conservative political leanings. This suggests that people with firmer worldviews may be especially susceptible to letting moral beliefs shape their sense of what is true. Yet the phenomenon is not limited to any one ideology; the mechanism applies broadly across the moral spectrum.

Who will check the fact-checkers?

Fact-checkers occupy a crucial role in modern information ecosystems, serving as mediators between public discourse and verifiable reality. Their mission is to identify misinformation, provide context, and promote accurate understanding. However, as with any authority tasked with evaluating truth claims, fact-checkers must themselves be subject to scrutiny. The question 'Who will police the policemen?' underscores the importance of ensuring transparency, accountability, and public oversight in the fact-checking process. The most reliable safeguard against misuse of authority is not blind trust, but critical engagement, methodological openness, and institutional plurality. A central concern in discussions of fact-checkers is political bias. While leading organisations maintain public commitments to neutrality, allegations of bias persist. Research reveals that perceptions of bias often depend

[115] Liu, B.S. and Ditto, P.H. (2012). What Dilemma? Moral Evaluation Shapes Factual Belief. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 4(3), pp.316–323. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550612456045.

more on the political orientation of the audience than on demonstrable evidence. Some studies found fact-checkers may appear biased simply because some political groups make more false claims. Other analyses suggest that the decision to focus on topics or public figures—rather than inaccuracies themselves—can create an impression of selectivity or agenda-driven coverage. These suspicions are further inflamed by concerns over funding and institutional affiliations. Many fact-checkers receive grants from philanthropic foundations, some of which are publicly associated with political ideologies. Partnerships with major tech firms like Facebook and Google have also provoked anxiety about potential corporate influence. In response, numerous organisations disclose their funding sources and maintain editorial independence protocols. Nevertheless, transparency alone does not immunise them from the risk of unconscious bias or institutional pressure. Criticism of fact-checkers emerges from both ends of the political spectrum. In the U.S., conservatives often argue that fact-checking disproportionately targets right-wing narratives, while some progressive voices charge fact-checkers with promoting false equivalence to maintain a facade of balance. These criticisms point less to outright dishonesty than to the deeper structural challenge of operating in a polarised media environment where trust itself has become ideological. The result is an overconfidence in premature conclusions and insufficient humility about uncertainty.

Biases

(From Echo Chambers to Polarisation: Deep-rooted cognitive biases)

Biases lie at the heart of our fragmented discourse, subtly steering what we notice, how we interpret evidence, and which voices we trust. Myside bias cements our views by filtering reality through identity-drenched lenses, while the 'peak bullshit' of post-truth communication rides emotional currents to bypass critical scrutiny. Even 'truthful' signals can mislead when they are costless cheap talk rather than genuine costly signals of credibility. Together, these dynamics erode shared reality and fuel polarisation. Yet awareness of these forces empowers us to pause, question our first impressions, and seek out disconfirming evidence. By deliberately exposing ourselves to diverse perspectives—and demanding clearer, more accountable signals—we can begin to bridge divides and rebuild a healthier public square grounded not just in facts, but in mutual understanding and trust.

The bias that divides us

In his book[116] 'The Bias That Divides Us' Keith E. Stanovich explores myside bias, a deeply ingrained cognitive tendency, that leads people to interpret, search for, and recall information in a way that reinforces their preexisting beliefs. Unlike temporary misunderstandings or gaps in knowledge, this bias is pervasive, enduring, and resistant to education, intelligence, or ideological moderation. It shapes the very core of how individuals evaluate facts and form judgments—whether in politics, science, law, or everyday life. What makes myside bias especially problematic is its universality: it affects liberals and conservatives, the educated and uneducated, scientists and laypeople alike. This phenomenon has been repeatedly demonstrated. In early studies from the 1950s college students watched the same football game and disagreed about who committed more fouls. Each group saw the same footage but reported infractions differently, depending on their allegiance. Later experiments replicated this effect in political contexts. Myside bias differs from similar-sounding concepts

[116] Stanovich, K.E. (2021). The bias that divides us : the science and politics of myside thinking. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Mit Press.

like confirmation bias or belief bias. Confirmation bias describes the search for evidence in favour of a particular hypothesis, and belief bias involves rejecting logical conclusions that contradict prior knowledge. But 'myside bias' is more deeply rooted. It concerns emotionally charged beliefs tied to identity—political ideology, religious conviction, or moral values. These are not easily swayed by logic or empirical counterarguments, because they serve social and psychological functions beyond truth-seeking. Modern research demonstrates the power of myside bias in shaping judgments on risk, morality, and political behaviour. When people support a policy, they tend to view its risks as minimal and its benefits as large. When they oppose it, the same policy suddenly seems dangerous and ineffective. In studies of alcohol consumption, climate change, or gun control, people downplay or emphasise risks in ways that match their values rather than the data. In politics, the bias is even more apparent. People evaluate identical actions more favourably when carried out by someone from their own party. In argument evaluations, individuals consistently rate statements supporting their views as more logical and coherent—even when objectively they are not. When asked to generate reasons for or against an issue, people overwhelmingly produce arguments that favour their own position, even when instructed to be neutral. Because the bias is linked to core identity structures, rational persuasion often fails to overcome it.

Post-truth and peak bullshit

In 'Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It' Evan Davis[117] identifies a central crisis of contemporary public life: the dominance of bullshit. In an era where emotional resonance frequently overrides factual accuracy this is not simply about lying; it is about the widespread prevalence of insincere, manipulative, or vague communication—often crafted by professionals in politics, media, and corporate messaging. The result is a culture in which words serve persuasion more than explanation, and clarity is sacrificed for effect. Davis situates this phenomenon in a longer tradition of rhetorical manipulation but warns that the contemporary moment has reached a saturation point—what he terms 'peak bullshit'. Davis traces this rise through several cultural and political shifts. In a 2013, after the end of the world in 2012 that did not happen, the post-truth era was born. In this environment, falsehoods are not simply tolerated—they are often celebrated as bold or authentic. From bizarre scientific claims to viral internet hoaxes, the breakdown of shared reality became a political tool and a cultural style. What makes post-truth communication different is that it does not merely avoid the truth—it renders truth irrelevant. Its power lies in emotional appeal, tribal loyalty, and the ability to reaffirm what audiences already feel or suspect. Social media platforms, with their incentives for virality and outrage, only amplify the problem. But this is not a sudden rupture. It builds on long-standing practices of exaggeration, marketing, and propaganda. The bullshit of the present, then, is not unprecedented—it is merely more aggressive, more visible, and more effective. Bullshit is any communication that is not the clearest and most sincere reflection of one has reasonably held beliefs. Unlike traditional lies, which are deliberate untruths, bullshit often operates in a zone of ambiguity, dressed in inflated rhetoric, misleading framing, or evasive generalities. Even well-meaning exaggeration or diplomatic phrasing can fall into this category. Sometimes, bullshit oils the wheels of human interaction. But its unrestrained use—particularly by those in power—undermines trust and the capacity for informed judgment. Why does bullshit flourish? Because it works. It simplifies,

[117] Davis, E. (2018). Post-truth : peak bullshit and what we can do about it. London: Abacus.

flatters, reassures, and energises. It aligns with the cognitive biases people already have. If audiences respond positively to emotional cues rather than rational scrutiny, bullshit will remain a dominant mode of public speech. However, its success comes at a cost: a degraded public sphere, a sceptical citizenry, and a culture of suspicion toward any claim of expertise or objectivity.

Why is there so much bullshit?

In an age saturated with soundbites, slogans, spin, and social media outrage, a fundamental question arises: why is there so much bullshit? Evan Davis, drawing on his background in economics and broadcasting, approaches this not as a rhetorical lament, but as a genuine inquiry into the mechanics and psychology of modern communication. The answer lies not just in the manipulative nature of those who spread nonsense, but in the incentives, institutions, and habits that reward it—and in the audience that tolerates or even embraces it. Economics teaches that information asymmetry distorts markets. Sellers know more than buyers and often have incentives to obscure truths. Yet economic models typically assume rational actors—people who detect and reject deception when it appears. Reality, however, proves far messier. Despite the glaring transparency of much modern bullshit, people still fall for it—or, more commonly, ignore its implausibility altogether. Why? Because bullshit often serves functions beyond truth: it flatters, simplifies, comforts, or signals allegiance. And sometimes, even if no one is convinced by it, bullshit persists because the system rewards its use. Consider the phrase, 'Your call is important to us'. Everyone knows it is empty. No one believes it. But its repetition serves as a placeholder—filler noise to maintain the illusion of care. Advertising slogans operate similarly: nobody truly believes 'A Mars a Day Helps You Work, Rest and Play', but the rhythmic message still nudges behaviour. In any regime, propaganda endures not because it convinced citizens, but because it reinforced a system that required public compliance. Even blank pamphlets, as in one ironic protest, could speak volumes—everyone knew the truth without needing words. Bullshit, then, is not only about convincing. It can be about occupying space, projecting intention, or avoiding silence. It becomes habit, a default, often accepted because real frankness is hard, risky, or socially discouraged. Nearly everyone engages in minor forms of bullshit embedded in everyday interaction. In the post-truth age, the problem has evolved. Bullshit is no longer just a layer of varnish over fact. Now, emotional appeal and ideological loyalty often matter more than accuracy. Falsehoods circulate freely online, amplified by confirmation bias and platform algorithms. This new strain of bullshit thrives in environments where people want their beliefs affirmed, not challenged, and where the line between satire, propaganda, and misinformation is intentionally blurred. Facts still matter—but they do not float in the public sphere as independent, unassailable truths. They require interpretation, trust, and contextual judgment. As Evan Davis notes, it is not only about whether something is true, but how heavily it weighs in decision-making.

The spectrum of mendacity

Outright lies represent only one end of a broader continuum of deception. At the other end lies a more insidious, subtler form of mendacity. In today’s information-saturated environment, this quieter breed of deception is both more common and more corrosive, precisely because it masquerades as factual. In some societies, the social and legal penalties for lying are high. Consequently, many public figures have mastered the art of avoiding lies while still distorting truth. They use techniques such as omission, selective framing, euphemism, and exaggerated emphasis. These tactics, though less blatant, often prove just as misleading—while

remaining harder to challenge or expose. This form of truth manipulation reveals a dysfunctional relationship with facts. The goal is not to inform or describe reality, but to persuade, obscure, or redirect attention. These deceptions operate under the cover of factual language, using truth as a tool for distortion. This pattern is a defining feature of the post-truth era, where facts are bent just enough to suit emotional or ideological narratives without triggering formal accusations of lying. To better understand how these distortions function, one can turn to economics and its study of information. For decades, economists have analysed how communication works in environments of unequal knowledge—what they call 'asymmetric information'. These studies focus less on deception and more on what makes a message credible. Surprisingly, while economists avoid the term 'bullshit', they have developed sophisticated theories that explain when and why people believe (or doubt) what others say. A central figure in this field is Michael Spence, whose 1972 thesis, 'Market Signaling', introduced the idea that people send 'signals'—costly, hard-to-fake actions—to convey unobservable qualities. This idea has profound implications for understanding deception. It explains why simply stating something—especially something self-serving—is not usually enough to convince others. Words are cheap. But when someone takes a costly action that supports their claim, the signal becomes more credible. That is why companies spend millions on brand advertising or why a firm might offer generous return policies: these are costly signals that express confidence. In contrast, much modern communication is 'cheap talk'—low-cost, unverifiable claims. Because these carry no penalty for dishonesty, they are easy to fake and thus often discounted. This is where subtle mendacity flourishes: when signals are not costly enough to distinguish sincerity from manipulation. Economists have tried to reconcile this gap with concepts like 'babbling equilibrium', where communication continues even when content lacks meaning or relevance. However, this still does not account for why bullshit sometimes persuades people, influences elections, sells products, or creates public panic. People are not just truth-seekers—they are also emotional, tribal, and often motivated by identity rather than evidence.

Hegemony

(From grammar to governance: How words construct and contest power)

For Gramsci language is far more than a neutral conduit: it is the very terrain on which power is won and maintained. Through everyday speech, standardised norms, and the work of organic intellectuals, ruling groups secure consent by embedding their worldview in 'common sense'. Yet this same linguistic field offers avenues for resistance: subaltern voices can forge alternative grammars, reinterpret meanings, and cultivate counter-hegemonic discourse. By tracing the historical sediments within each word and recognising how normative and spontaneous grammars interact, we see that transforming society begins with transforming language itself. In this light, political struggle is inseparable from cultural and linguistic struggle—challenging hegemony requires not only new arguments but new vocabularies and narratives that reshape what is taken for granted.

Language and hegemony in Gramsci

In 'Language and Hegemony in Gramsci' Peter Ives[118] explores the centrality of language in Antonio Gramsci's 'Prison Notebooks'. His concept of hegemony—where domination is secured not merely by force but through cultural consent—has since shaped debates in

[118]Ives, P. (2004). Language and hegemony in Gramsci. London ; Ann Arbor, Mi: Pluto Press.

Marxism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, and political theory. Peter Ives argues that Gramsci's engagement with language is not incidental, but essential to understanding the mechanics of consent and power in modern societies. Gramsci redefined hegemony as a process by which ruling classes establish moral and intellectual leadership over subordinate groups, not only through institutions of coercion but via cultural and linguistic norms. His emphasis on everyday practices, education, and common sense reveals how language is a tool through which ideology is normalised and internalised. Unlike the traditional Marxist focus on economic determinism, Gramsci paid close attention to how language both reflects and produces power. His study of the Italian language, especially its standardisation, became a model for analysing how linguistic practices function within larger hegemonic systems. Language, for Gramsci, was never abstract—it was grounded in the concrete realities of education, social class, and cultural institutions. His theory of the 'organic intellectual' is key here: intellectuals are not detached elites, but individuals embedded within and expressing the worldview of their class. Thus, linguistic struggle becomes class struggle, and grammar becomes a battlefield for ideology. Gramsci's understanding of discourse shows how political identity and antagonism are constructed through language, reinforcing the idea that discourse shapes reality rather than simply reflecting it. Language is not just a medium of communication, but a terrain of struggle, where the definitions of truth, authority, and legitimacy are contested.

Language and social theory

By situating Gramsci within a broader tradition of linguistic thought, we see how his political theory was shaped by, and contributed to, the evolving understanding of language as a force in social life. The twentieth century witnessed a transformation in how language was conceptualised in relation to material production and political power. The rise of information economies, digital communication, and symbolic labour blurred the boundary between intellectual and manual work. This shift was not only technological but ideological: language itself became a site of production and contestation. In the realm of mass democracy, where persuasion and cultural consent are central to maintaining order, language emerged as a key medium through which political power is exercised and resisted. Gramsci responded to this new configuration by developing his theory of hegemony, which explains how dominant groups maintain control not merely through coercion but by shaping cultural norms, institutions, and everyday language. For Gramsci, understanding how people speak, think, and make sense of their world was essential to grasping how consent is manufactured and sustained. The lineage of these ideas goes through the first major linguistic turn in social theory: structuralism. Ferdinand de Saussure's 'Course in General Linguistics' introduced the view of language as a system of signs structured by internal relations. Saussure emphasised a synchronic (present-focused) approach over a diachronic (historical) one, redefining language as 'langue' (the abstract system) and 'parole' (individual utterance). His concept of the arbitrary sign—comprising a signifier and signified bound only by convention—laid the foundation for structuralist analysis in anthropology, semiotics, and cultural studies. Saussure's ideas influenced Claude Lévi-Strauss, who applied structuralist methods to myths and kinship systems, and Louis Althusser, who recast Marxist theory by analysing how ideological institutions produce subjectivity. Both saw language and symbolic systems not merely as reflections of material life but as constitutive of social relations themselves. Jacques Lacan brought this structuralist insight into psychoanalysis, claiming the unconscious is structured like a language. For Lacan, identity and desire are mediated by symbolic orders, and language becomes the very condition for human subjectivity. This further solidified the view that meaning, identity, and ideology are not external to language but formed through it. Gramsci

absorbed many of these insights, though he remained politically grounded. His concern was not abstract theory but how linguistic practices in education, religion, and media shape common sense and naturalise power. Unlike later poststructuralists, Gramsci retained a materialist concern with class, struggle, and historical specificity. Gramsci's work as a pivotal contribution to a tradition that understands language as both a mirror and a maker of social order.

Language as a tool for hegemony

Gramsci's theory of hegemony places language at the heart of political and cultural domination. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a vehicle through which dominant ideologies are transmitted, normalised, and internalised. Language embeds worldviews and functions as a medium through which power organises consent. Through everyday speech and cultural discourse, dominant groups shape what is understood as 'common sense'—a body of beliefs that appears natural and self-evident but is, in fact, ideologically constructed. Subaltern groups, those marginalised in power structures, often adopt these dominant conceptions unknowingly. This is not due to manipulation alone but to the fragmented and incoherent nature of their own worldviews. Gramsci argues that individuals always belong to a particular social grouping, and when their conception of the world is uncritical or episodic, they unknowingly internalise elements from multiple ideological systems, often contradictory. Without a coherent language or philosophy to express their own interests, subaltern groups remain ideologically subordinate and politically disorganised. Gramsci also connects language to national unity and political legitimacy. He writes that when the 'question of language' emerges, it always signals deeper struggles: the consolidation of ruling groups, the need to expand governance, and the cultural alignment between elites and the masses. Language thus becomes a marker of political consolidation, class dominance, and the spread of hegemonic values. Beyond its communicative function, Gramsci treats language as a metaphorical model for social and political systems. In his 'Prison Notebooks', especially the twenty-ninth, he suggests that grammatical rules and linguistic structure can be seen as metaphors for how consent is organised in society. Language becomes a map of cultural processes: shaped by history, sedimented with meanings, and structured by power. He likens language to a 'museum of fossils', where every word carries traces of previous epochs and ideologies. Meaning emerges from the internal structure and relational dynamics of language itself. Language operates metaphorically not just at the level of individual words but at the systemic level—linking ideas, shaping thought, and guiding behaviour in ways that reinforce ideological hierarchies. Language is both a repository of past worldviews and a battlefield for present ideological struggles. It offers the means through which power is maintained—but also the potential through which it may be contested and transformed.

Metaphor and hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's theory of language reimagines it not merely as a tool for communication but as a metaphorical expression of cultural and political hegemony. For him, language is a social battlefield, where ideology is not simply transmitted but embodied in its structure. It carries the imprint of historical power struggles and reflects the shifting dynamics of dominance and consent. Language changes with transformations in civilisation, absorbing the influence of rising social groups while maintaining the imprint of dominant ones. This process often results in one language or dialect asserting itself over others, not through merit, but through the consolidation of cultural power. Gramsci draws a parallel between grammar and political authority. He distinguishes between spontaneous grammar, which emerges organically from lived experience, and normative grammar, which is imposed by institutions to

define what is considered correct or prestigious. Spontaneous grammar reflects the diversity of local cultures and everyday speech, while normative grammar consolidates control by elevating certain forms over others. When elites promote one dialect—such as the Florentine variety in Italy—as a national standard, it serves as a symbolic act of domination, masquerading as unification. Instead of embracing this centralisation, Gramsci calls for a democratic integration of diverse grammars as a cultural strategy for resistance. Crucial to this theory is the insistence on language's historicity. Unlike structuralist approaches that abstract language into static systems, Gramsci sees each word as a historical artefact, bearing the ideological weight of previous epochs. Words are shaped by former uses, battles of meaning, and civilisational shifts; they do not merely refer to things but carry traces of the social contexts in which they once operated. This layered view of language reveals that hegemony is not a permanent state but a continuous process of negotiation and adaptation. Just as language evolves through metaphor and absorption, so too does political consensus. Language thus becomes both a lens and a lever—an instrument for understanding how power embeds itself in everyday life and a space where alternative cultural logics can emerge. Through the contestation of language itself, new grammars of social meaning can be forged, offering a method for challenging dominance and reimagining collective life.

3.2. Conspiracy speech

(Shadow narratives: Language, authority, and rhetorical arsenal)

'The hallmark of a conspiracy theory is that it is ultimately irrefutable'.

— Cass Sunstein & Adrian Vermeule, Conspiracy Theories

'Suspicion is the dialect of the powerless'.

— Luc Boltanski, Distant Suffering

'The conspiracy theory becomes a closed system, one that converts all opposition into further evidence of the plot'.

— Michael Barkun, A Culture of Conspiracy

Linguistic theory of conspiracy

A conspiracy is a secret agreement between individuals or groups to commit an unlawful or harmful act. What distinguishes it from ordinary secrecy is its coordinated intent to deceive or disrupt social, political, or institutional orders. Whether involving treason, corruption, or covert sabotage, conspiracies are defined by their clandestine nature and shared purpose. They operate in the shadows not merely for protection, but to ensure cohesion and trust among the conspirators, maintaining their shared narrative while excluding the broader public. Secrecy, in this context, is not a side effect but a necessary condition of the collective act. The word 'conspiracy' comes from the Latin 'conspiratio', meaning 'to breathe together'. This etymology reveals the essential function of conspiracy: to create an exclusive form of unity, an enclosed network of shared intention. It is language turned inward—covert communication that binds insiders and excludes outsiders. In this sense, a conspiracy is more than an act; it is a linguistic

structure. It functions by aligning meaning, belief, and trust within a closed group, often with the purpose of challenging or manipulating an external system of authority. This logic is echoed in conspiracy theories. These narratives posit that powerful, unseen forces orchestrate major events behind the scenes. Unlike actual conspiracies, which may eventually be exposed, conspiracy theories are resistant to refutation. Any evidence against them is reabsorbed into the theory itself, reinforcing its logic. Conspiracy theories thus become self-contained, belief-driven systems that mirror the closed unity of actual conspiracies—creating strong internal consensus among believers. Cognitive biases help explain why conspiracy theories persist. In times of fear or uncertainty, they offer emotionally resonant explanations. For those who feel alienated or powerless, conspiracy theories create a sense of clarity and belonging. They become cultural narratives that simplify chaos into moral drama—offering not just a belief, but a community. The rapid spread of conspiracy theories via digital media, coupled with the erosion of institutional trust, has made them more potent than ever. They create an internal language of truth, often at odds with public consensus. This brings us to a deeper insight: the structural goal of both conspiracy and conspiracy theory is consensus. The act of conspiracy depends on absolute internal trust and agreement—without this, the secrecy collapses. Similarly, conspiracy theories work by generating consensus among believers, turning the extraordinary and unbelievable into a coherent worldview. This mirrors the fundamental purpose of language itself: to generate shared meaning, foster coordination, and build communal understanding. Language, conspiracy, and conspiracy theory all aim at the same end—consensus. Whether it is a cabal whispering in secret or a group online sharing suspicions, the goal is to construct a common belief, to align minds. In this sense, conspiracy is not a deviation from linguistic order but an intensification of it. It exposes how language can bind tightly, even dangerously, when it seeks not openness or plurality, but absolute internal agreement.

Taking conspiracy culture seriously

In 'Taking Conspiracy Culture Seriously: Journalism's Epistemological Challenge[119]' Juliette De Maeyer argues that conspiracy culture has become an unavoidable part of public discourse. Whether in casual conversations, online forums, or public protests, conspiracy narratives shape how many people perceive journalism, politics, and truth itself. These views are no longer confined to fringe communities. Surveys suggest that a significant portion of the population subscribes to conspiratorial beliefs about major events, driven not only by misinformation but by a deeper mistrust in institutions—including journalism. Conspiracy culture should not be dismissed as mere irrationality; it reflects a growing scepticism toward conventional sources of knowledge and calls into question the very foundations of how information is produced, validated, and circulated. At the heart of conspiracy thinking is the belief that hidden forces manipulate public perception. This worldview has historical roots in modernity's obsession with unveiling secret networks and invisible power. From 19th-century detective fiction to 20th-century cybernetic models, the notion that everything is connected and that surface appearances conceal deeper realities has gained cultural legitimacy. As systems of governance and media grew more complex, so too did the public's appetite for explanations that could pierce the opacity of modern life. Conspiracy thinking emerged as a response to this complexity, offering emotionally satisfying explanations in place of institutional ambiguity.

[119] De Maeyer, J. (2018). Taking conspiracy culture seriously: Journalism needs to face its epistemological trouble. Journalism, 20(1), pp.21–23. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918807037.

Journalism finds itself in an epistemological dilemma. On the surface, its investigative methods—digging for facts, questioning official narratives, exposing corruption—mirror those of conspiracy theorists. Yet where journalism aspires to evidence-based verification, conspiracism indulges in speculative coherence. This overlap exposes a troubling paradox: conspiracy culture mimics journalism's ideals while rejecting its authority. The problem deepens as journalism's traditional claim to objectivity is increasingly challenged by both critical theory and public cynicism. Objectivity, once defined as separating fact from opinion, is now viewed by some as a rhetorical device rather than a guarantee of truth. Meanwhile, conspiracy culture exploits the same language of doubt and critique, turning it against journalism itself. This dual erosion—from postmodern critique and conspiratorial suspicion—forces journalism to reconsider its epistemological framework. What counts as a fact? Who determines its legitimacy? Can journalism still serve as a credible witness to reality in an age when both its methods and motives are under constant suspicion? Rather than retreating into defensive objectivity or dismissing conspiracy theories as irrational noise, journalism must engage these questions head-on. This involves admitting that facts are constructed through processes—interviews, documents, verification—but that this construction does not equal fabrication. It means acknowledging that the truth is often provisional, incomplete, and fragile—yet still worth pursuing with discipline and transparency. The problem is not with the conspiracy culture but with journalism.

Religious studies of conspiracy theories

In 'The Hidden Hand: Why Religious Studies Need to Take Conspiracy Theories Seriously[120]' David G. Robertson inquires the intersection of religion and conspiracy theory as a crucial area, particularly in an era marked by political polarisation, populist rhetoric, and increasing public suspicion toward established institutions. Long treated as a marginal or even distasteful subject in academic circles, conspiracy culture has become too prominent to ignore. From the religiously inflected language to the apocalyptic visions conspiracy narratives are often interwoven with theological motifs and eschatological expectations. This is not a fringe curiosity but a mainstream phenomenon deserving serious scholarly engagement within religious studies and the wider social sciences. Conspiracy thinking and religious belief share several structural features. Both often rely on a teleological view of history, the presence of hidden agents or forces, and an interpretive framework in which contradictions are resolved not by refutation but by deeper initiation. Conspiracies offer moral clarity and an explanation of evil, much like religious theodicy. They appeal to an epistemology of suspicion, where official narratives are seen as concealments rather than explanations. This convergence is especially visible in New Age and millennialist subcultures, where failed prophecies often give rise to elaborate theories of suppression or deception. Conspiracism fills a gap left by disillusionment, justifying the delay of expected revelations by invoking hidden enemies and institutional silencing. Religious studies scholars must also consider the history of conspiracies 'about' religions. Targeting religious groups by conspiracist rhetoric that taps into long-standing fears and prejudices. These narratives often repackage old scapegoating tropes under the guise of rational scepticism. At the same time, conspiracy theories also arise within religious communities. Internal narratives of persecution function as a response to external resistance, bolstering group identity and deepening the sense of a battle between good and evil. The label

[120] Robertson, D.G. (2017). The hidden hand: Why religious studies need to take conspiracy theories seriously. Religion Compass, 11(3-4), p.e12233. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12233.

'conspiracy theory' itself functions as a rhetorical tool of exclusion. It discredits certain claims not necessarily on their content but by their association with irrationality. Conspiracy narratives challenge dominant regimes of truth by proposing alternative explanations rooted in 'stigmatised knowledge'—a term used by Michael Barkun to describe beliefs outside accepted epistemological norms. Conspiracism, like religion, provides existential meaning, moral orientation, and interpretive coherence in chaotic times. To dismiss it wholesale as irrational is to overlook its social function and symbolic resonance. For scholars of religion, taking conspiracy theories seriously means understanding them as part of a broader cultural system that negotiates uncertainty, distrust, and moral order. Engaging with conspiracy theories on these terms—critically, but not dismissively—opens a path to better understand contemporary belief systems, their anxieties, and their hidden hands.

Conspiracy against science

In an age dominated by misinformation and emotional reasoning, pseudoscience has become a widespread cultural force—challenging the authority of scientific knowledge and eroding public trust in expertise. 'Pseudoscience: The Conspiracy Against Science[121]', edited by Allison B. Kaufman and James C. Kaufman, offers a comprehensive and urgent examination of this phenomenon, drawing on psychology, history, sociology, and science communication to understand and combat the growing influence of pseudoscientific thought. The modern world is not only awash with information but overwhelmed by misinformation. This 'post-truth' condition reflects a societal preference for intuition, anecdote, and emotion over analysis, data, and rigor. From climate change denial and anti-vaccination movements to beliefs in haunted houses and telekinesis, the persistence of pseudoscientific ideas is not just a fringe curiosity—it is a pressing issue with profound consequences for public health, education, and democratic governance. The pseudoscience does not simply stem from ignorance. It flourishes because it provides cognitive and emotional rewards. Pseudoscientific beliefs offer simplicity in the face of complexity, certainty in the face of ambiguity, and empowerment in the face of helplessness. Cognitive biases—confirmation bias, pattern recognition, and the affect heuristic—are deeply embedded in human cognition, shaping how people interpret evidence and assess truth. Even highly educated individuals, the book shows, are not immune when outside their domain of expertise. One of the most striking themes is how pseudoscience mimics the surface features of science—technical language, appeals to evidence, claims of expertise—while rejecting its foundations: scepticism, falsifiability, and openness to revision. Karl Popper's classic demarcation criterion, falsifiability, remains a crucial tool, though the editors emphasise that the science-pseudoscience divide is more of a spectrum than a binary distinction. What separates science from pseudoscience is not the absence of error, but the presence of mechanisms to detect and correct it. Pseudoscience and conspiracy thinking form a dual front in the ongoing challenge to rational, evidence-based reasoning in modern society. Both question the legitimacy of established institutions and undermine public understanding of science, though their methods and motivations differ. Pseudoscience often imitates the structures and language of science to gain legitimacy, while conspiracy theories tend to reject mainstream authority outright. Together, however, they foster a culture of scepticism that distorts truth and promotes doubt in scientific expertise. Like conspiracy theories, pseudoscientific claims have deep historical roots and have grown more influential in the postwar period, particularly during

[121] Kaufman, A.B. and Kaufman, J.C. (2019). Pseudoscience: the conspiracy against science. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mit Press.

times of institutional mistrust. The characteristic trait of conspiratorial logic is that an evidence against a claim is interpreted as evidence for it. This inversion of critical thinking mirrors pseudoscience's frequent dismissal of contradictory data, especially when that data originates from authoritative or academic sources. Such reasoning not only resists falsification but thrives on its own isolation, turning critique into fuel for further belief. Yet an essential difference between the two lies in their orientation toward scientific authority. While conspiracy theorists often seek to dismantle scientific credibility, pseudoscientists attempt to co-opt it. Intelligent design theory, for example, does not merely deny evolution—it mimics scientific methodology to gain a foothold in academic discourse. Pseudoscience arises not from opposition to science but from its cultural prestige; pseudoscientists want the legitimacy of science without submitting to its standards. One of the key arguments in 'Pseudoscience: The Conspiracy Against Science' is that efforts to eliminate pseudoscience entirely may be unrealistic. Attempts to define science rigidly or to refute pseudoscientific claims one by one are limited in their effectiveness. Scientific knowledge is provisional, evolving as new evidence becomes available. Yet the public often demands certainty and definitive answers. When science provides nuanced or cautious conclusions, it can appear weak or indecisive—fertile ground for pseudoscientific narratives that promise clarity and confidence. This problem is compounded by the conflation of legitimate concerns with unfounded speculation. For instance, critiques of pharmaceutical malfeasance are often drowned out by baseless anti-vaccine rhetoric. Such confusion damages both public health and the credibility of scientific critique. Meanwhile, powerful institutions weaponise the label 'conspiracy theory' to discredit critics and deflect scrutiny.

Empires of conspiracy

In 'Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America[122]' Timothy Melley claims that in postwar American culture, conspiracy has emerged not merely as a narrative device but as a defining structure of feeling. The paranoia and erosion of personal autonomy reflect a cultural crisis rooted in transformations of subjectivity, agency, and power. As society became increasingly dominated by massive bureaucracies, corporate conglomerates, and military-industrial structures, individuals perceived themselves as increasingly controlled by impersonal systems. This perceived loss of control produced what Melley terms 'agency panic'—a widespread anxiety over the inability to locate or exert personal agency in a world governed by vast, often invisible powers. Contrary to narratives that portray postmodernism as a liberation from modern alienation, Melley suggests that postmodern literature and theory remain deeply entangled in paranoid concerns. Rather than replacing the paranoid subject with a fragmented, schizophrenic one, postmodernism amplifies the fear of dispersed agency by imagining new, systemic threats. Novels by Pynchon, DeLillo, and Burroughs do not abandon the concept of a coherent self but rather reassert it through their paranoid plots. They project individual anxieties onto external systems—corporations, governments, technologies—that appear to act with intentionality and coherence, turning abstract structures into subjects with agency. The persistence of conspiracy as a cultural logic reflects more than narrative fashion; it speaks to how people in complex societies attempt to manage uncertainty. When cause and effect are opaque, when actions are shaped by opaque institutions or global networks, individuals resort to the explanatory comfort of conspiracy. Paranoia functions as a strategy to

[122] Melley, T. (2000). Empire of conspiracy : the culture of paranoia in postwar America. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

reassert agency, even in distorted form. It transforms randomness into design, contingency into plot, and systemic complexity into the intention of a hidden actor. Melley contends that postwar American paranoia is not a psychological aberration but a symptom of broader social transformations. As traditional structures of meaning and individual authority erode, people search for substitutes—often through conspiratorial thinking. Postmodernism, rather than deconstructing agency, often reproduces its crisis. Thus, the 'empire of conspiracy' is not just a reflection of cultural irrationality, but a coping mechanism for navigating power in a depersonalised world. To understand postwar and contemporary culture, scholars must take conspiracy seriously—not as delusion, but as a logic through which agency is imagined, contested, and narratively reasserted in the face of systemic complexity.

Contemporary conspiracy culture

In 'Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability[123]' Jaron Harambam adopts a neutral position on the truth claims of conspiracy theories and explores the everyday experiences of individuals engaged in the conspiracy world. In an age of widespread scepticism toward institutional authority and the proliferation of competing truths, conspiracy theories have become a central cultural phenomenon. Rather than treating them as pathological deviations from rational discourse, Jaron Harambam proposes understanding them as meaningful worldviews that reflect broader tensions around knowledge, legitimacy, and power. This approach shifts the sociological gaze from debunking to understanding, from policing truth to analysing how it is constructed and contested. The aim is not to assess whether conspiracy theories are true or false but to investigate how they make sense to the people who believe them and what they reveal about the societies in which they circulate. This stance stems from a commitment to methodological agnosticism—a refusal to judge truth claims in advance. Like an anthropologist studying unfamiliar belief systems, Harambam examines conspiracy theories as cultural forms that offer coherence, explanation, and resistance. In a fragmented information landscape, where trust in science, media, and government has eroded, these theories articulate dissent and make visible the cracks in dominant epistemologies. To call them irrational is to miss their significance; they are not simply false beliefs, but expressions of a deeper anxiety about who controls knowledge and how truth is produced. In democratic societies, dissent must not be pathologised or excluded. Conspiracy theories, however flawed, often express legitimate grievances and distrust born from historical experiences of marginalisation or deception. Silencing them only deepens alienation. As Zygmunt Bauman suggests, the intellectual's role is not to arbitrate truth but to interpret and mediate between competing values. Similarly, Bruno Latour calls for the sociologist to act as a diplomat, fostering dialogue between divergent ontologies. In this spirit, Harambam calls for democratic engagement rather than epistemic policing. Creating inclusive spaces for open debate is not only a matter of intellectual fairness but a requirement for social cohesion. Conspiracy theories should not be dismissed outright, but neither should they be accepted uncritically. Their power lies in challenging dominant narratives, questioning the monopoly of official truth, and pushing society to reflect on the foundations of its knowledge systems. Ultimately, the value of Harambam's approach is that it reframes the study of conspiracy culture as a mirror for our broader epistemic crisis. The rise of conspiracy theories signals a breakdown in trust, a struggle over who gets to define reality, and a call for more

[123] Jaron Harambam (2020). Contemporary Conspiracy Culture. Routledge.

participatory models of knowledge. Rather than asking whether conspiracy theorists are right or wrong, the more urgent question is: what does their rise say about the current state of truth, authority, and democracy? Sociology, then, must not retreat into neutrality as detachment but embrace neutrality as engagement—an openness to understanding the complexity of belief in unstable times. Harambam's work shows that conspiracy theories are not fringe aberrations, but vital cultural responses to a world where the very structure of knowing has come undone. In such a world, the task is not to restore old certainties but to create new conditions for shared inquiry, dialogue, and the democratic pursuit of what Karl Popper called the 'best available truth'.

The conspiracy theory of society

In 'The Conspiracy Theory of Society[124]' Karl R. Popper wants to clarify the central task of social science by rejecting a flawed view he calls the 'conspiracy theory of society'. This theory assumes that major historical and social events are the result of deliberate planning by powerful groups or individuals—shadowy forces orchestrating wars, economic crises, revolutions, or technological change. While it masquerades as rational analysis, it is, in fact, a secular continuation of ancient myths—like Homer's belief that events on the battlefield mirrored secret intrigues among the gods on Mount Olympus. In modern form, gods are replaced with elites, secret societies, or political institutions presumed to act with malevolent coordination. This mindset is appealing because it gives people a sense of clarity and agency in a confusing world. But it is fundamentally misleading. The world is not ruled by hidden masterminds. More often, events spiral from a multitude of actions that no one fully controls. Even when conspiracies are real, they often unravel or fail, plagued by the very unpredictability they seek to dominate. This is the 'Oedipus Effect': attempts to reshape society based on conspiratorial assumptions often produce the very chaos they claim to prevent. The reality is that most social outcomes are unintended. People act with goals in mind, but the broader effects of their actions usually exceed or contradict those intentions. Understanding these unintended consequences is the true task of social science. Unlike conspiracy theorists, who reduce complexity to conscious planning, social scientists examine the chain reactions of individual behaviour within specific institutional settings. These ripple effects—often unforeseen and sometimes undesirable—shape the world far more than any secret scheme. Moreover, conspiracy theories wrongly treat institutions as if they had unified wills. They assign agency to abstract collectives like governments, corporations, or classes, as if such bodies acted like singular individuals. But institutions are composed of many actors with divergent goals and limited knowledge. Their actions produce collective effects that are rarely the product of deliberate design. Thus, the flaws in the conspiracy theory of society are twofold. First, it ignores the disordered and emergent nature of social processes. Second, it falsely assumes that intentions can fully account for outcomes. The true insight of social science lies not in exposing conspiracies but in tracing how the interaction of many individuals—each acting with partial knowledge and varied motives—gives rise to broader patterns and structures. The study of these unintended consequences allows us to make sense of society without resorting to paranoia. Instead of imagining secret plots, social science seeks to understand how institutions persist, change, or fail—despite the absence of any overarching plan. In doing so, it offers a more realistic, and ultimately more useful, account of how history unfolds. By showing how both

[124] Popper, K.R. (2019). The Conspiracy Theory of Society *. Routledge eBooks, pp.13–15. doi:https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315259574-2.

conspiracies and conspiracy theories mimic the very structure of linguistic agreement, Karl Popper situates the problem not merely in politics or psychology, but in the heart of communication itself. It is a warning, and a philosophical challenge, that remains startlingly prescient.

Cognitive infiltration

In their 2008 paper[125] 'Conspiracy Theories', legal scholars Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule examine the rise, persistence, and consequences of conspiracy theories in modern society. They argue that such theories—those attributing remarkable events to secretive, malevolent actors—are not just fringe curiosities, but potential threats to democratic institutions and national security. Particularly in the realm of counterterrorism, both domestic and international conspiracy theories can undermine public trust, derail policies, and incite violence. The authors highlight the real-world prevalence of such beliefs, including widespread suspicions of U.S. government involvement in the 9/11 attacks, which by the mid-2000s were embraced by large segments of both American and international populations. At the root of conspiracy theories lies a psychological and epistemological condition Sunstein and Vermeule call 'crippled epistemology'. People exposed only to limited or skewed information sources—often shared within ideological or social echo chambers—develop distorted worldviews. These views are sustained by social mechanisms like informational cascades and group polarisation, where individuals increasingly adopt beliefs held by their peers, assuming credibility and expertise where there may be none. The result is a self-reinforcing system: misinformation gains traction not through evidence, but through emotional resonance, repetition, and conformity. Moreover, conspiracy theories provide a sense of order and agency in the face of uncertainty and trauma, making them both emotionally compelling and difficult to dislodge. A key challenge in confronting conspiracy theories is their self-sealing nature. When a theory becomes entrenched, counterevidence is not just rejected—it is reinterpreted as part of the cover-up. Government denials are seen as proof of guilt, expert refutations are dismissed as disinformation, and attempts to debunk the theory can backfire, deepening believers' commitment. This dynamic makes direct rebuttal a delicate task and, in some cases, ineffective or counterproductive. To address these challenges, Sunstein and Vermeule show more interest in a strategy they term 'cognitive infiltration'. Cognitive infiltration involves inserting agents—either government operatives or sympathetic outsiders—into groups that promote conspiracy theories. The goal is to subtly introduce dissenting views, challenge faulty logic, and raise doubts without triggering defensive reactions. By disrupting groupthink and encouraging epistemological diversity, such agents can, in theory, erode the certainty and appeal of conspiratorial narratives. The goal is to introduce 'cognitive diversity', enabling the group to encounter competing viewpoints and reassess its foundational beliefs. This can be achieved through engagement in forums, online discussions, or even offline meetings where false claims are questioned, internal contradictions are exposed, and factual counterpoints are introduced. These infiltrations can be open (where the agents reveal their affiliations) or covert (where their identities remain hidden). Each method comes with risks: transparency may reduce influence, while secrecy invites backlash if discovered. Crucially, Sunstein and Vermeule acknowledge that credibility is key to success. If counterarguments are perceived as government-sponsored, they may be dismissed out of hand. Therefore, they suggest leveraging independent experts—

[125] Sunstein, C.R. and Vermeule, A. (2008). Conspiracy Theories. [online] papers.ssrn.com. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1084585.

scientists, academics, journalists—who can deliver credible counter speech without being visibly linked to state agendas. However, they also recognise the irony that too much government involvement risks exposure, which could invalidate the effort entirely: 'The price of credibility is that government cannot be seen to control the independent experts'. This proposal has drawn heavy criticism. Legal scholars and civil liberties advocates have raised alarms over potential violations of free speech, governmental overreach, and the erosion of public trust. Critics argue that the use of covert tactics, especially against domestic audiences, blurs the line between security policy and propaganda. While the idea of cognitive infiltration remains controversial, it highlights the need for innovative responses to an age-old problem: the human tendency to seek hidden causes and assign blame in the absence of clarity. In conclusion, conspiracy theories present complex dangers that cannot be addressed through force or silence alone.

3.3. Kayfabe and roleplaying

'Sincerity becomes performance when it is constantly watched'.

— Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

'In a world that is constantly posing, the act of being genuine becomes revolutionary'.

— Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (paraphrased synthesis)

Kayfabe

(Kayfabrication: When spectacle becomes truth)

Kayfabe has evolved far beyond the squared circle of professional wrestling into a pervasive logic of modern life, where truth and fiction entwine in an elaborate performance. From economics and politics to social media and science, we now navigate systems built on consented illusions rather than transparent facts. What once was a mechanism to manage danger and boredom in choreographed brawls now structures public discourse, commodity markets, and personal identities. By reframing deception as a collaborative, narrative-driven process—what Eric Weinstein christened 'kayfabrication'—we uncover a new grammar of social reality: one that privileges emotional engagement and spectacle over empirical certainty. Recognising kayfabe's reach helps explain why audiences willingly suspend disbelief and why correcting falsehoods often fails to disrupt the broader performance.

Kayfabrication

In 2011 Eric Weinstein authored an article[126] that 'kayfabe' is the most important scientific concept to improve your cognitive toolkit. The term is born in the scripted world of professional wrestling, offers a compelling framework for understanding the contemporary breakdown between truth and performance in broader cultural, political, and scientific systems. In the

[126] www.edge.org. (n.d.). Edge.org. [online] Available at: https://www.edge.org/response-detail/11783.

words of Weinstein: 'We may fairly ask what rigorous system would be capable of tying together an altered reality of layered falsehoods in which absolutely nothing can be assumed to be as it appears. Such a system, in continuous development for more than a century, is known to exist and now supports an intricate multi-billion-dollar business empire of pure hokum. It is known to wrestling's insiders as 'Kayfabe''. Rather than dismissing deception as an aberration or pathology, kayfabe recasts it as a functional necessity—an evolved technique for managing unpredictability and boredom within complex systems. It signals a shift from systems based on truth and transparency to ones based on mutually sustained illusions, where audiences knowingly participate in the fabrication. In its original context, kayfabe referred to the illusion that wrestling matches were real athletic contests. Wrestlers adopted personas, engaged in staged rivalries, and followed scripted storylines, all while maintaining the performance as if it were authentic. The audience, fully aware of the fiction, agreed to suspend disbelief—not because they were misled, but because the performance was compelling. The real betrayal was not lying but breaking the script. This careful equilibrium between reality and illusion helped transform wrestling from a failed competitive sport into a multibillion-dollar entertainment industry. This same dynamic now appears far beyond the wrestling ring. In economics, opposing theoretical schools present public feuds while relying on similarly flawed assumptions that failed to anticipate real-world collapses like the 2008 crisis. In politics, performative rivalries between parties or candidates often mask shared systemic interests. In journalism, adversarial narratives increasingly resemble staged drama. And in theoretical science, particularly physics, debates between camps like string theory and loop quantum gravity produce more rhetorical heat than empirical progress. These institutions maintain kayfabe not by denying reality, but by managing it theatrically, crafting narratives that preserve engagement and coherence even when substance is lacking. The shift to kayfabrication—the systematic replacement of reality with coordinated illusion—emerges in part to control two central problems: danger and dullness. Real competition, real inquiry, and real conflict are risky and often boring. Kayfabe resolves this by imposing structure on uncertainty and turning unpredictability into performance. Whether in war, love, finance, or politics, spectacle displaces substance. Online dating becomes an exchange of curated identities; geopolitical posturing replaces direct combat; asset bubbles inflate around hype rather than value. These examples show kayfabe functioning as a stabiliser—a way of preserving audience engagement without confronting the full volatility of unmediated reality. Yet kayfabe has limits. Sometimes the fiction spills into real life: staged rivalries provoke genuine animosities, fictional relationships lead to actual infidelities, and audience complicity turns into disillusionment. Still, audiences often tolerate or even embrace these breaches. When wrestling publicly admitted it was scripted, fans did not turn away. They accepted the contract anew, recognising that they were not being deceived but invited to imagine. The illusion held, not because it was undetected, but because it was desired. This dynamic now defines large parts of public life. Truth is not so much obscured as outsourced to the audience. The burden of belief is no longer on the performer’s credibility but on the viewer’s willingness to play along. This transformation marks a deeper shift in epistemology and social structure: the performative overtakes the evidential, and narrative coherence matters more than factual consistency. Kayfabe thus provides a new grammar for deception—one did not root in error or bad faith but in consent, expectation, and mutual performance. It reveals a society less interested in discovering the truth than in co-creating believable realities. In this sense, kayfabe is not only a cultural metaphor but a diagnostic tool. It helps decode how modern institutions retain legitimacy not by being true, but by being entertaining, persuasive, and narratively compelling. In this landscape, lies are not aberrations to be unmasked but structural necessities to be interpreted. Ultimately, kayfabe is

not about fooling the public but about maintaining a performance that everyone agrees not to interrupt. As audiences learn to see through the act while continuing to participate in it, deception ceases to be a hidden manipulation and becomes a shared enterprise. The curtain is always slightly open, but no one dares to pull it back entirely. Kayfabe survives not because people are gullible, but because they are complicit—and because, often, they prefer the show.

Political entertainment

In 'Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America' (2023), Abraham Josephine Riesman explores how the theatrical concept of kayfabe—originally from professional wrestling—has become a defining feature of American political discourse. The book uses the career and cultural influence of Vince McMahon, the longtime head of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), as a springboard to examine how American politics now mirrors wrestling's scripted spectacle. Riesman argues that politicians have adopted not just wrestling's language and performance techniques, but its entire logic of engagement, built on emotional manipulation, spectacle, and the blurred line between truth and fiction. Central to Riesman's analysis is the idea that Donald Trump embodies the wrestling 'heel'—a deliberate antagonist who thrives on outrage and division. Like a wrestling villain, Trump crafts an image that polarises the audience, drawing loyalty from fans and hatred from opponents. This tension ensures constant engagement. Riesman terms this dynamic 'neokayfabe', a postmodern evolution of the traditional kayfabe in which the audience no longer needs to believe the performance is real. In 'neokayfabe', everyone knows it is a show, but they play along anyway—truth becomes less relevant than spectacle, and sincerity is replaced by strategic irony and provocation. In this performative world, political success depends less on policy coherence and more on emotional impact. Politicians use kayfabe-style tactics to provoke reactions, dominate media attention, and sidestep accountability. Their roles as 'heels' generate continuous discourse regardless of content. It is like an open season to be bad character to attract more online traffic. Audiences are conditioned not to seek truth, but to pick sides in a drama. Even criticism or fact-checking amplifies their performance. Riesman shows how outrage is a resource, not a liability, and those who master the dynamics of kayfabe can harness antagonism to consolidate power. The social network principle 'angry people click more' is activated. The book also traces how the aesthetics and psychology of wrestling—especially from the 1980s and 1990s WWE era—shaped a generation of Americans. Millennials grew up watching over-the-top personas engage in scripted battles where winning was often secondary to showmanship. This cultural formation blurred the line between fiction and public life, making kayfabe not just entertainment but an unconscious political grammar. Politicians now succeed by being larger-than-life characters, not thoughtful leaders. The shift in American public life occurs when emotional gratification and narrative spectacle have eclipsed reasoned debate. Entertainment has overtaken truth as the currency of political power. The kayfabrication of America, lies in the country's growing willingness to accept the blurring of real and fake, fact and fiction. Politics becomes a stage, the electorate a crowd primed for conflict, and public discourse a series of orchestrated storylines.

Language of kayfabe

The language of kayfabe, originally developed within the spectacle of professional wrestling, provides a unique framework for understanding how fictionalised narratives function to create shared realities. While kayfabe is often viewed as a cultural curiosity of sports entertainment, its structure and techniques resemble other powerful discursive forms, such as religious and extremist political language. These linguistic systems differ in stakes, intentions,

and consequences, but they all operate by constructing enclosed worlds of meaning through stylised performance, emotional resonance, and audience participation. In wrestling, kayfabe refers to the ongoing presentation of scripted feuds, alliances, and characters as real. Wrestlers adopt exaggerated personas—heroes (faces) and villains (heels)—engaging in conflict narratives that evoke classic themes of betrayal, redemption, and victory. The success of kayfabe lies in the audience's consent to suspend disbelief. Fans knowingly participate in the illusion, appreciating the narrative arc even as they remain aware of its fabrication. This conscious complicity fosters community through entertainment, generating affective bonds among spectators without requiring ideological commitment or moral allegiance. Religious language, by contrast, is aimed at communicating sacred truths, often through metaphor, ritual, and allegory. While it also draws on narrative and symbolism, it seeks to engage believers on a deeper existential level, promising moral order, transcendence, and purpose. Unlike kayfabe, the stakes are ultimate—concerning salvation, sin, and spiritual destiny. Here, the language must be perceived as sincere, even if metaphorical, and its authority is grounded not in performance but in tradition, revelation, or divine command. Extremist language similarly constructs closed systems of meaning but with the intent to polarise, mobilise, and dominate. It operates through binary oppositions—us versus them, good versus evil—and relies heavily on propaganda, repetition, and emotional escalation. Unlike kayfabe, which returns the audience to reality unchanged, extremist language demands loyalty and real-world action. It distorts facts to fit ideological narratives and reinforces group identity by excluding and vilifying others. The language becomes a tool of control, producing cognitive rigidity and moral certainty. All three forms of language are performative but differ in how they negotiate truth and reality. Kayfabe is overtly fictional but emotionally authentic, inviting playful belief. Religious language is spiritually authentic, rooted in faith and doctrine, often resistant to empirical scrutiny but deeply meaningful to its adherents. Extremist language weaponises belief, treating facts as malleable in service of its goals, and demands unwavering acceptance under threat of social or physical consequences. The language of kayfabe offers an inclusive, low-risk mode of shared fiction, where audiences join a temporary world without abandoning their autonomy. Religious language, though more exclusive, seeks lasting moral transformation and collective identity. Extremist language narrows reality into rigid ideological scripts, producing conformity through fear and exclusion. Despite their differences, all three reveal how language does not merely reflect reality—it constructs it, sustains it, and sometimes destroys it. In analysing kayfabe alongside religious and extremist discourse, it becomes clear that language is not a passive medium. It is a stage on which meaning is enacted, truth is negotiated, and entire worlds are made believable, whether for joy, salvation, or domination.

Neokayfabe in politics

In neokayfabe, the audience knows the performance is fake but chooses to go along with it. Truth becomes secondary to drama, but entertainment becomes close to genuine experience. Neokayfabe language mix exaggerated claims with half-truths and self-aware irony, inviting both support and ridicule. Yet, both reactions serve his purpose: attention. Like a wrestling heel, speaker feeds off antagonism as much as admiration, knowing that 'it pays to be hated'. The public personas of the politicians are crafted not to unite, but to divide strategically, weaponising outrage into influence. The ancient divide-and-rule principle works on every level. This framework also explains the dynamics of intra-party conflict. A rivalry between two 'faces' forced into conflict becomes a theatrical battle between dominant egos, a performance with political stakes but constructed like a wrestling feud. A generation raised on the spectacle-heavy, melodramatic world of 1980s and 1990s wrestling absorbed its lessons: villains can be

more compelling than heroes; winning is less important than holding the spotlight; and narratives do not need to be true—they just need to resonate. These sensibilities now shape American politics, where emotional impact trumps policy, and every public appearance is a performance calibrated for reaction. The most dangerous feature of neokayfabe is its immunity to correction. Fact-checking fails not because it is wrong, but because it is beside the point. Neokayfabe does not depend on truth; it feeds on confusion. Audience accepts inconsistency as part of the act, rendering traditional political norms obsolete. Understanding American politics today requires fluency in the language of kayfabe—where perception is power, and the audience, knowingly or not, plays its role in the performance. Unlike classical kayfabe, which required belief in illusion, neokayfabe accepts that the illusion is false but sustains it anyway. This conscious suspension of disbelief, now dominates not only political communication but also and public discourse. The audience is not deceived so much as entertained, involved, and emotionally invested. The goal is no longer credibility but impact and immersion. In this climate, fact and fiction are deliberately interwoven. Political language becomes a strategic tool not for clarity or persuasion but for narrative construction. Neokayfabe rejects consistency. Speech can contradict itself freely because coherence is no longer expected. What matters is emotional alignment and spectacle. Truth gives way to authenticity—not in the sense of honesty, but in the performance of being 'real'. This emotional logic reshapes language itself. Rational discourse is displaced by slogans, tropes, and phrases that carry affective weight. In this framework, saying what is socially forbidden or controversial becomes a badge of courage. Speaking the 'unsayable' does not need to be factually correct; it merely needs to stir the right feelings in the right crowd. The audience, in turn, amplifies this speech—through memes, chants, hashtags—making them active participants in the performance. Media, too, plays a vital role. By amplifying outrageous statements, even when criticising them, media institutions unwittingly participate in the spectacle. Traditional tools like fact-checking become irrelevant. Audiences do not necessarily believe falsehoods; they support the speaker despite—or because of—them. The emotional drama is the message. The consequences are significant. Neokayfabe erodes trust in shared reality, encouraging parallel truths and deepening societal fragmentation. It normalises chaos as a governing tool, disorients opposition, and renders strategic outrage a permanent feature of political engagement. Critics become villains, and every attack reinforces the leader’s status as persecuted truth-teller. This logic cements division. As fact and fiction dissolve into managed personas and narrative warfare, Riesman’s insight provides a framework for understanding a world where language no longer seeks agreement, only allegiance. Neokayfabe is not deception; it is a pact—an aesthetic of power built on performance and belief. At the heart of neokayfabe is performative authenticity—the paradox of being seen as more 'real' precisely because the performance is so overt.

Roleplaying

(Curated selves: The performance of modern identity)

Roleplaying of identity has become a defining feature of contemporary existence, turning the self into both actor and stage. Whether on social media, in the workplace, or within social movements, individuals craft and perform personas that blend fragments of truth with intentional fabrication. This neokayfabe dynamic offers adaptability—allowing us to project confidence, solidarity, or rebellion—but at the cost of emotional labour, anxiety, and eroding trust. As audiences grow ever more attuned to the artifice, genuine expression risks being discounted as another façade. Yet we continue to participate, craving connection even when we suspect it is staged. Recognising identity roleplaying as a structural, mutual performance helps

explain why authenticity feels both essential and elusive in a world where everyone is playing a part.

Roleplaying of an identity

In contemporary society, identity is no longer a fixed or purely internal concept—it is something performed, curated, and projected. Roleplaying of an identity refers to the conscious or unconscious adoption of a self-image that aligns with external expectations, social pressures, or aspirational ideals. This behaviour is not limited to actors or politicians but is embedded in daily life: a professional who suppresses doubt to appear confident, a parent who masks exhaustion to embody perfect care, or a social media user presenting a filtered life story. These performances are neither lies nor wholly authentic—they are strategic constructions designed for audiences. This phenomenon exemplifies what Abraham Josephine Riesman calls neokayfabe: a postmodern form of performance where both the actor and audience are aware of the fabrication, but engage with it as if it were real. Individuals know they are playing roles, but this self-awareness does not diminish the effect. On the contrary, the performative illusion becomes more powerful, because it is willingly believed in, even if only temporarily. Central to this is performative authenticity, the act of staging moments to appear spontaneous and genuine. A candid photo that took ten tries, a vulnerable confession designed to increase relatability, or the careful crafting of a persona aligned with activist or professional goals—all are examples of authenticity being performed. These staged performances depend on emotional resonance rather than factual truth. The illusion of honesty becomes a tool for building connection, status, or influence. Neokayfabe thrives in digital culture, especially on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, where the pressure to 'be real' paradoxically encourages greater levels of editing, scripting, and branding. Identity becomes content. Personal lives are reshaped into narratives optimised for emotional impact and social validation. Even rebellion and nonconformity can become roles played to fit into niche subcultures or ideological groups. Beyond digital media, the culture of personal branding reinforces this dynamic. People build coherent images of themselves—as mentors, survivors, creators, or leaders—by highlighting fragments of truth while omitting inconvenient contradictions. Strategic storytelling replaces full disclosure. These constructed identities are maintained not only for acceptance but often as necessary performances in navigating institutions, careers, and social life. The implications are profound. On one hand, identity roleplaying offers flexibility and resilience—it allows people to test roles, survive social pressures, or adapt to institutions that demand conformity. On the other hand, it imposes emotional labour. Constantly performing a curated self can cause dissonance, exhaustion, or anxiety. When everyone is assumed to be performing, genuine expression risks being dismissed as another layer of branding or manipulation. Moreover, trust is destabilised. As audiences become aware of the artificial nature of modern identity, scepticism deepens. Interpersonal relationships may suffer, and societal dialogue becomes mired in doubt over sincerity. Yet even within this cynicism, people continue to play roles and emotionally engage with others' performances. This paradox is the essence of neokayfabe. In conclusion, roleplaying of identity is no longer peripheral but central to contemporary life. It reflects a broader cultural transition where perception, narrative, and emotional effect take precedence over truth, and where authenticity is no longer a given—but a performance that must be carefully maintained.

Virtue signalling without virtue

In an era dominated by social media and the politics of appearance, virtue signalling has emerged as a defining behaviour of public discourse. At its core, virtue signalling refers to the

public expression of moral values—usually progressive or popular ones—not out of genuine commitment, but to demonstrate moral superiority or alignment with a socially approved ideology. While the term carries a distinctly negative connotation, often used to criticise superficial or insincere activism, it captures a deeper crisis in how public morality is performed, consumed, and manipulated. What was once a private struggle for moral excellence has become a performance stage, where signs of virtue are displayed like badges rather than embodied through difficult action or sacrifice. Virtue signalling is not inherently about lying. In fact, most who engage in it likely believe at some level in the causes they proclaim. The problem lies in the disconnection between speech and action, in the performative nature of the act, and in the motivation behind it. Social media accelerates this performativity by rewarding fast, emotional expressions over slow, reasoned deeds. In a digital world driven by likes, shares, and follower counts, moral expression becomes a currency. Posting a badge, retweeting buzzwords or wearing a slogan t-shirt becomes a ritualistic display—one that signals group membership, awareness, and compassion, even when unaccompanied by any practical effort toward the cause. This phenomenon is particularly visible in corporations and celebrities, who adopt moral postures to enhance brand loyalty or public image. A fashion company may launch a sustainability line while maintaining exploitative labour practices; a public figure might advocate for inclusivity while operating within exclusive, elite networks. The contradiction is not hidden—it is often part of the spectacle. If the right words are said and the right symbols are used, the performance is accepted, even praised. This is not activism, but theatre. Historically, virtue was understood as a habitual practice—a commitment to moral behaviour even when it is difficult, inconvenient, or unseen. The ancient philosophers, from Aristotle to the Stoics, insisted that virtue could not be separated from action. Words alone were never enough. Even religious traditions warn against public displays of righteousness. The Gospel of Matthew admonishes those who 'practice their piety before others to be seen by them', insisting that real virtue is measured in hidden sacrifice, not public praise. In this light, the modern spectacle of virtue signalling appears hollow, a parody of moral life rather than its fulfilment. But some argue that public displays of moral concern can still have value. Even symbolic gestures can create awareness, normalise compassion, and help shape cultural expectations. Moreover, accusing others of virtue signalling can become its own kind of signalling—what has been termed 'vice signalling', in which people publicly reject moral language to appear cynical, tough, or nonconformist. A politician who mocks climate activists may not be indifferent to the environment but seeks to appear grounded and pragmatic. This counter-performance, too, relies on the audience’s perception. Nonetheless, the proliferation of virtue signalling raises serious concerns. First, it fosters a culture of moral inflation, in which louder expressions are mistaken for deeper convictions. Second, it encourages tribalism, dividing people into symbolic camps where slogans matter more than substance. Third, it distracts from real problems. When moral discourse becomes a spectacle, attention is diverted from complex, structural challenges that require long-term commitment and nuanced thinking. Genuine activism, with all its uncertainties and imperfections, is replaced by simplified narratives and emotional immediacy. The rise of virtue signalling also erodes trust. If people begin to doubt the sincerity of moral language, they become more sceptical of others’ commitments and more hesitant to express their own. In such a climate, authentic moral engagement becomes difficult. People fear being called hypocrites or attention-seekers, so they stay silent or retreat into cynicism. Thus, the performative nature of modern virtue discourse not only undermines the credibility of public morality but makes meaningful dialogue harder to sustain. Ultimately, virtue signalling reflects the tension between identity and integrity. In a world increasingly shaped by platforms, personas, and performance, the temptation to craft a moral identity for

external approval is powerful. But identity without integrity is fragile. It collapses under scrutiny. The antidote is not silence, nor the rejection of public discourse, but a renewed understanding of virtue as something more than a pose. Real virtue is difficult. It involves listening more than speaking, acting without being seen, and risking unpopularity when justice demands it. To restore substance to public morality, the gap between values and actions must be closed. A single tweet is not activism. Wearing a cause is not living it. And projecting virtue without effort or consequence is not moral progress—it is camouflage. What is needed is less moral grandstanding and more quiet courage. In a culture obsessed with optics, the most radical gesture may be sincerity.

Vice signalling

In a culture driven by spectacle and polarisation, language has shifted from a tool of communication to a performance of identity. Public discourse is now shaped by the staging of values rather than their substance. One increasingly prominent mode of speech is vice signalling—the deliberate display of transgressive views to provoke, attract attention, and affirm group belonging. It is not simply the absence of virtue, but the calculated inversion of it. The speaker courts controversy not to inform, but to inflame, using outrage as a signal of authenticity. Vice signalling works by reversing the logic of virtue signalling. Where virtue signalling seeks moral approval by aligning with socially accepted causes, vice signalling seeks admiration through defiance. It thrives on dramatic language, exaggerated claims, and inflammatory statements. These utterances need not be coherent or factually accurate; their function is to evoke an emotional response, to cast the speaker as fearless and unfiltered. In this way, transgression becomes a rhetorical resource. Saying what is forbidden, offensive, or taboo is treated as a sign of courage rather than ignorance. This mode of communication reduces language to symbolic gestures. Public figures increasingly adopt controversial stances not to articulate beliefs, but to perform strength or authenticity. Political discourse, media appearances, and online commentary become arenas for affective signalling. The speaker is rewarded not for thoughtful argument, but for provoking strong reactions. Whether praised or condemned, visibility is the goal. Audiences shaped by this environment learn to respond to speech emotionally rather than analytically. Words are judged not by their truth value but by their alignment with group feeling. Loyalty replaces evaluation. Language becomes a tool for tribal identification, and discourse is replaced by echo chambers. Memes, soundbites, and slogans spread not because they clarify, but because they resonate. The meaning lies not in content, but in function—who said it, how it feels, and what it signals. Vice signalling also influences political strategy. Leaders adopt polarising rhetoric to project toughness or realism, not necessarily to propose workable policies. Their statements are often theatrical, designed to provoke rather than persuade. This performance of toughness reassures supporters, even as it alienates others. The message is less about governance and more about identity: who is strong, who is real, who is not afraid to offend. As a result, public debate is increasingly shaped by posture rather than substance. Both virtue and vice signalling contribute to a broader shift in public language, where speech becomes a performance of character rather than a medium for reasoned exchange. Virtue signalling may simplify justice into fashionable stances; vice signalling may reduce realism to blunt cruelty. In both cases, complex realities are flattened into emotional expressions designed to affirm belonging or difference. This dynamic rewards extremity, discourages nuance, and turns speech into a contest of impressions. What emerges is a culture in which expressing values—whether virtuous or rebellious—is less about conviction and more about visibility. The performance of moral concern without action is hollow, but so is the celebration of defiance without thought. Vice signalling, like its

counterpart, reflects a media environment where provocation, not persuasion, rules. It replaces clarity with spectacle and substitutes the pursuit of truth with the pursuit of attention.

Vocal fry as an epidemic

Vocal fry—the low, creaky vibration at the bottom of the vocal register—has become one of the most divisive linguistic trends of the last decade, particularly when used by young women. Popularised by celebrities and reinforced by countless social media influencers, this speaking style is often dismissed as annoying, lazy, or fake. But behind the irritation it provokes in some listeners lies a deeper set of questions about gender, power, and linguistic change. At its core, vocal fry is a physiological technique: the vocal cords relax and vibrate slowly, producing a gravelly tone. Yet in Western societies, when young women use vocal fry, it is often pathologised or ridiculed as a cultural disease. Critics argue that vocal fry makes speakers sound untrustworthy, unintelligent, or uninterested—especially in professional settings. Yet studies show that people with deeper voices, particularly men, are more likely to be promoted and earn higher salaries. Women adopting vocal fry may therefore be responding strategically to the gendered expectations of authority, deliberately lowering their vocal tone to command more respect or mirror male speech patterns in the workplace. But not all use of vocal fry is strategic. For many young women, it is simply part of their speech community, a way to perform identity and fit into their social milieu. Language is not static; it is performative and adaptive. Trends like vocal fry reflect shifting dynamics in gender expression and generational belonging. Just as giggling in the 1950s or shrieking in the 1960s once annoyed older generations, vocal fry has become a scapegoat for broader anxieties about youth, femininity, and cultural change. Much of the backlash comes from the assumption that vocal fry is fake or lazy—a deliberate affectation by teenagers or 'idle rich' celebrities. In the research 'Habitual Use of Vocal Fry in Young Adult Female Speakers[127]' the authors examined the presence of vocal fry in a population of female college students who speak Standard American English (SAE). Their analysis revealed that a considerable proportion of these speakers habitually use vocal fry during sentence reading, especially at the ends of sentences. Crucially, the study distinguished between continual and selective use of vocal fry—suggesting it may serve a linguistic function, such as signalling syntactic or pragmatic boundaries. That said, the social dimension cannot be ignored. Some students may be emulating speech patterns heard from media figures or peers, making fry part of a wider social identity marker. Comedic scenes like those from the show 'Loudermilk' (Season 2, Episode 1) portray fry-heavy voices as annoying signals of boredom or arrogance. With deadpan irritation, Sam interrupts the barista to ask why she is 'talking like that'. She, unfazed, insists 'this is my voice', but Sam calls out the affectation. What follows is a comedic confrontation in which Sam mimics her vocal fry, accusing her of choosing to sound disinterested and insincere—something, he claims, is popular among 'annoying teenagers and rich people'. These portrayals often serve as moral judgments about femininity, class, or youth. The use of vocal fry says less about the voice itself and more about cultural expectations. Vocal fry, like uptalk, has become a proxy for debates over gender, status, and authority. Vocal fry challenges traditional hierarchies. Young women speaking in a way that suggests control or knowledge can upset those who think authority should sound different—more 'proper'. Others may hear vocal fry and associate it with cultural change they do not like: social media culture,

[127] Wolk, L., Abdelli-Beruh, N.B. and Slavin, D. (2012). Habitual Use of Vocal Fry in Young Adult Female Speakers. Journal of Voice, [online] 26(3), pp.e111–e116. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2011.04.007.

changing gender roles, or perceived declines in decorum. But those are reactions to social shifts, not to a sound itself.

Second Chapter: GENESIS

1. ORIGINS

1.1. The talking ape

(From grunts to grammar: Tracing language's slow evolution)

'Language evolved as a tool for social coordination, not as a means of abstract representation'.

— Terrence Deacon, The Symbolic Species

'We speak not only to tell others what we think, but to tell ourselves what we think'.

— Oliver Sacks, Seeing Voices

The talking ape

Language did not emerge fully formed or through a sudden leap in human cognition. In 'The Talking Ape: How Language Evolved[128]', Robbins Burling outlines a step-by-step development, showing how modern grammar slowly emerged through a combination of intuitive communication, social interaction, and incremental refinement. Unlike theories that posit an abrupt biological shift, Burling proposes that syntax, the rules that structure language, developed gradually from more primitive expressions of meaning. The journey begins with isolated words—simple, referential utterances that needed no grammar. Over time, early speakers began pairing words to convey more nuanced meanings. New combinations lacked structure but signalled relations through intonation, rhythm, and context. The order of words began to matter. Phrases would come to imply different intentions, giving rise to the first patterns of word order and suggesting the early seeds of syntax. A major driver of linguistic evolution was a process called grammaticalisation. Words used frequently in specific contexts became streamlined, compressed, or repurposed into grammatical markers. Over generations, phrases and concrete terms extended into abstract usage. These shifts, though small, accumulated into the elaborate systems of grammar we see today. Importantly, these changes often happened not by design but through common usage—by speakers seeking efficiency and listeners demanding clarity. As more words clustered together, the need for relational terms grew. Function words like 'and', 'but', and 'if' emerged to link ideas. What started as simple naming and pointing evolved into structures capable of expressing logic, causality, and time. In this new space, humans began to distinguish subjects from objects, and verbs from nouns—not by innate categories, but through habitual usage and social reinforcement. Children and their tendency to simplify and regularise input helped refine language. Inconsistent patterns from adult speech were filtered through the child's mind into more consistent rules, which were then adopted by the next generation. In this way, linguistic structures evolved both biologically and

[128] Burling, R. (2005).The Talking Ape: How Language Evolved. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

culturally, shaped by the minds of speakers and the demands of communication. Rather than imagine grammar as a rigid system appearing overnight, Burling paints a picture of slow construction, built brick by brick through countless interactions. Early humans did not need a perfect syntax to communicate effectively; they needed only enough structure to be understood. Over millennia, the scaffolding of modern grammar emerged from these minimal foundations, through play, repetition, and necessity. Language, in this view, is not a miracle or mystery—it is a human invention. Like tools, it evolved to meet practical and social needs, shaped by the hands and voices of countless speakers before us.

What has language done to us?

Language did not just help humans survive—it reshaped what it means to be human. In the chapter 'What Has Language Done to Us?', Robbins Burling shifts the focus from speculative origins to the lived consequences of language: not how it began, but what it has done. Far more than a tool for exchanging information, language became the scaffolding of social life, thought, and civilisation. It bound individuals together in invisible structures, shaped our memories, gave names to the unseen, and even changed how people perceive themselves and others. Unlike most tools, language operates both externally and internally. It is used to persuade and instruct, to deceive and to heal, but also to think. While other species communicate, only humans narrate, accuse, justify, and gossip. The array of speech acts—promises, threats, jokes, flirtations—reflects the principal place language occupies in human social life. Even in communities with little material complexity language brims with nuance. Their vocabulary for social relationships is as rich as any modern society, suggesting that speech is not simply for survival, but for living together meaningfully. Language also rewires the mind. It sharpens memory, clarifies thought, and allows people to imagine futures and reflect on pasts. A name anchors memory. A word allows an abstract feeling to be shared and dissected. Without language, it is not just communication that falters—entire modes of thought disappear. A deaf woman in rural India who never learnt formal sign language could manage her daily life, but her grasp of abstract concepts like kinship or justice was limited. Without words for such ideas, their boundaries remained undefined, unreachable. But language is not always benevolent. The same capacity that allows people to build shared truths can also fuel illusions. Words can inflate, obscure, or twist meaning. Concepts like 'nation', 'honour', or 'eternity' are powerful not because they are precise, but because they are not. Language gave humans the ability to argue about things that do not exist outside of speech—and sometimes to kill for them. Still, through language, knowledge could outlast the speaker. Writing transformed this impermanence. Laws, records, rituals—everything could now persist. The invention of writing, only a few millennia old, accelerated civilisation by stabilising its foundations: memory, obligation, story. Language is uniquely human not because it is innate but because it is both shared and learnt. Every human learns a language by being immersed in a culture. This rare combination makes language both flexible and enduring. It allows traditions to accumulate and ideas to travel far from their origin. Culture, in its many forms, rides on the back of language.

Origins of language

Speech, distinct from language, is the vocal expression of human communication. Its origin remains one of the most enigmatic and debated questions in science, drawing on biology, anthropology, and linguistics without a single accepted explanation. Though many animals communicate vocally, none do so with the complexity or flexibility of human speech. Speech arose not from a single cause but through layered transformations—biological, cognitive, and social. Its origins reveal how communication is not merely a tool but a force that shaped the

human body and mind. Speech did not simply evolve to express language. Rather, language found in speech its most powerful and adaptable voice. Is it possible that language precedes speech? The origin of language marks one of the most profound transformations in the history of life. Language enabled early humans not only to coordinate action and transmit information but also to construct symbolic worlds and shared meanings. Its emergence is not attributed to a single cause or moment but to a slow coalescence of anatomical, cognitive, and social developments. Unlike speech, which refers to a specific vocal modality, language encompasses any system capable of encoding and transmitting abstract thought—spoken, gestural, or written. Yet the path to its emergence remains obscured by the absence of direct fossil traces, leaving only indirect clues: archaeological evidence of symbolic behaviour, genetic mutations, anatomical changes, and contemporary insights into language acquisition and use. For much of modern history, language origins were treated as speculation. In 1866, the Paris Linguistic Society famously banned debate on the subject, discouraging academic inquiry. Yet by the late twentieth century, advances in neuroscience, evolutionary theory, and cognitive science revived the field, grounding formerly abstract questions in empirical research. Competing theories emerged, divided along two main axes: gradual evolution versus sudden emergence, and innate mechanisms versus learnt cultural development. Continuity theories propose that language evolved incrementally from primate communication systems, driven by selection pressures favouring increasingly complex vocal or gestural signs. Proponents highlight the social intelligence of primates, their use of calls, and gestural repertoire. The gestural theory, for example, posits that human language originated in manual signs later transferred to vocalisation as tool use and bipedalism made the hands less available. Support for this comes from the neural overlap in the brain's control of hand and mouth gestures and from the existence of modern sign languages with grammatical sophistication equal to spoken ones. In contrast, discontinuity theories argue that language represents a leap—an unprecedented development with no clear analogue in the animal world. The most prominent version of this is the single-mutation theory, which proposes that a sudden genetic change enabled recursive thought and syntactic structure, giving rise to language as an entire system. Central to this model is the operation known as Merge, thought to underlie all human grammar. While such a theory accounts for the uniqueness of language, it is often criticised for neglecting the incremental, embodied, and cultural dimensions of linguistic development. Some scholars argue that language emerged not from a sudden mutation but through a social transformation that unlocked dormant symbolic capacities. According to this view, exemplified by ritual/speech coevolution theory, language required a shift toward high public trust and accountability. Without such a transformation, symbolic communication would have remained evolutionarily unstable. Even primates like chimpanzees and bonobos possess latent symbolic abilities they rarely use in the wild, suggesting that a supportive social structure—rather than a genetic leap—was key. Only within such conditions could language, as a system of low-cost signals, become a viable and enduring means of communication.

Roots of language

Human language did not appear out of nowhere, nor does it exist in isolated forms across cultures without some deeper link. In 'Roots of Language[129]', Derek Bickerton argues that understanding where language comes from, how children learn it, and how new languages like creoles emerge are not separate puzzles—they are three parts of the same story. The real insight, he suggests, comes when one stops treating these questions in isolation and begins to look at

[129] Bickerton, D. (1981).Roots of Language. Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers.

the human capacity for language as a unified, biological, and cultural phenomenon. Bickerton starts where few linguists do—with creole languages. These are not just linguistic leftovers or simplified pidgins. When a community of speakers creates a creole, they are doing something remarkable. Children, often with limited and inconsistent input from older generations, build a full, complex language system in just a generation. This, Bickerton says, reveals a deep cognitive blueprint at work—a kind of 'bioprogram' that humans are born with. It is not copying; it is invention. That same creative force is visible when children learn to speak. No one teaches them grammar formally. Instead, they make sense of language by testing patterns, forming structures, and even making consistent 'errors' that hint at innate rules. These patterns mirror the innovations seen in creole formation, suggesting that the child's mind does not passively absorb language—it actively constructs it. But where did this bioprogram come from? Language did not emerge fully formed, and humans did not suddenly start speaking complex sentences one day. The answer, Bickerton proposes, lies in evolutionary processes shaped by natural selection. Over time, our ancestors developed cognitive tools—like symbolic thinking and recursive processing—that allowed for the rise of structured language. These tools did not evolve for language alone, but once in place, they made language possible. There is a paradox here, though. If language is unique to humans, how did it evolve from creatures that did not have it? Bickerton addresses this 'continuity paradox' by suggesting that language did not require a sudden leap, but rather a convergence of mental abilities that, once assembled, opened the door to linguistic expression. Just as walking did not appear overnight but evolved through gradual anatomical changes, language came about through overlapping pressures and slow shifts—biological, cognitive, and social. Language is not just a cultural artefact, nor just a biological instinct. It is both—a product of evolution and of daily human invention. And rather than being built from the top down by complex societies, it seems to arise from below, shaped by individuals equipped with the tools to build meaning from almost nothing. 'Roots of Language' does not just trace the origin of words—it seeks the origin of meaning itself, in the minds and mouths of those who must speak even before they understand what speaking means.

Language in our brain

Human language is a singular achievement of evolution, enabling not only communication but also abstract reasoning, storytelling, and cultural transmission. What makes this capacity uniquely human is not just the use of sounds or gestures, but the ability to generate and understand complex hierarchical structures—sentences within sentences, thoughts layered with intent, reference, and memory. This sophisticated linguistic ability is underpinned by specific features of the human brain, particularly its architecture for syntactic processing. Angela D. Friederici, in her book[130] 'Language in Our Brain: The Origins of a Uniquely Human Capacity', offers a detailed exploration of these neurobiological foundations and the evolutionary developments that made language possible. One of the core questions Friederici addresses is why humans alone can process grammar with such precision and spontaneity. When people speak, they do not consciously follow grammatical rules, yet they intuitively structure phrases that reflect the principles of syntax. This fluency is enabled by a dedicated neural network centred on Broca’s area, located in the left inferior frontal gyrus, and the posterior superior temporal gyrus (STG). These regions are connected by a dorsal fibre tract known as the arcuate fasciculus. This connection is crucial for hierarchical syntactic processing, allowing humans to combine words into nested, recursive structures. While other animals, such

[130] Friederici, A.D. (2017). Language in Our Brain: The Origins of a Uniquely Human Capacity. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

as primates and songbirds, display impressive cognitive and vocal abilities, they lack the neural architecture for complex syntax. Songbirds can learn and reproduce sequences of sounds and even exhibit forms of phonological syntax. Non-human primates can understand basic rule-based patterns, yet neither group shows evidence of recursive, embedded structures—a hallmark of human language. Studies have shown that while Broca's area exists in primates, the critical dorsal pathway linking it to the STG is either absent or underdeveloped. In humans, this tract matures slowly during childhood, correlating with the period of language acquisition and suggesting an extended developmental window for linguistic specialisation. Friederici also addresses the debate over the gestural origins of language. Some theorists propose that manual gestures were the foundation of early communication, later evolving into vocal language. Neuroscientific evidence complicates this view. Although gestures and speech both activate Broca's area, they rely on different connectivity patterns. Syntax processing in speech requires interaction between Broca's area and the posterior STG via the arcuate fasciculus—connections not found in gesture-related neural activity. This suggests that while gesture may have played a role in early communication, the capacity for syntax required a distinct neural pathway. Genetic evidence adds another layer to this picture. The FOXP2 gene, often associated with language, appears in both humans and other animals, but mutations in this gene in humans result in significant speech and language deficits. This implies a regulatory function over other genes involved in brain development. Genetic divergence related to language likely began around 300,000 to 400,000 years ago, possibly before the emergence of anatomically modern humans. These changes supported the growth of neural structures essential for language, particularly those enabling syntactic computation. How the brain got language? Language did not appear in a single moment. It was not gifted to humans like a divine spark or switched on by a gene. It emerged gradually, as a complex dance between body, brain, and culture. 'How the Brain Got Language: Towards a New Road Map[131]', edited by Michael A. Arbib, is a collection of studies that treats language not as a singular invention but as the long result of biological shifts and social transformations. Together, they suggest that language is not a single miracle but a slow layering of gesture, sound, memory, trust, imitation, and emotional expression. One of the volume's core ideas is the 'language-ready brain'. That term does not mean early humans could already speak, but that they had the neural foundations—developed from earlier primates—that made speech possible. These foundations did not emerge in isolation. They were shaped by the demands of social life: the need to coordinate, persuade, nurture, remember, and imagine. The real pivot point seems to lie not just in biology but in culture. Cooperative breeding, for example—the way humans care for one another's young—may have demanded new levels of coordination, emotion sharing, and turn-taking. These social behaviours may have created the pressure for more elaborate communication systems. Language, after all, is not just a code in the brain. It is a social bond, a cultural artefact, and perhaps the most fragile and powerful thing humans have ever made. Language is both a cultural invention and a biologically grounded capacity. It is shaped by evolutionary pressures and expressed through specialised neural networks. Syntax—the combinatorial heart of language—is not learnt by rote but emerges from the structural and functional organisation of the human brain. This capacity defines Homo sapiens as 'Homo loquens', the speaking human, whose systems of knowledge and societies are built through language.

[131] Arbib, M. A. (ed.) (2020).How the Brain Got Language: Towards a New Road Map. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Our reptilian brain

To speak is not just to make sounds—it is to activate something ancient and complex inside the human brain. In 'Human Language and Our Reptilian Brain[132]', Philip Lieberman explores how speech and thought are deeply tied to parts of the brain that long predate language itself. Beneath the neocortex, under the folds and regions people often associate with higher reasoning, lies a network of older systems: the subcortical structures, the so-called 'reptilian brain'. These systems, responsible for movement, sequencing, and survival, now underpin some of the most sophisticated human behaviours, including language. It is tempting to think of speech as a purely modern invention, the product of big brains and cultural complexity. But language does not emerge from nowhere—it is built on older capabilities. The same neural circuits that once helped early vertebrates coordinate their limbs now help humans coordinate sentences. Lieberman argues that structures like the basal ganglia, long involved in sequencing motor actions like walking or chewing, have been co-opted for sequencing syllables and syntax. The evolutionary story of speech, then, is one of repurposing rather than reinvention. And yet, this repurposing came with trade-offs. The human vocal tract, adapted to produce a wide range of speech sounds, also makes people more likely to choke. Unlike other primates, humans have a larynx that sits lower in the throat, creating a longer resonating chamber and allowing for the full palette of vowels that form the basis of spoken language. But this same anatomy turns the mouth and throat into a precarious balancing act between breathing, eating, and speaking. From an evolutionary perspective, such a risky modification makes sense only if the payoff—language—was enormous. What about grammar, that intricate scaffolding that holds sentences together? Traditional linguistic theories, particularly those tied to the idea of a Universal Grammar, suggest that humans are born with a built-in blueprint for syntax. Lieberman pushes back. Instead of imagining a hardwired 'language organ', he points to the brain's plasticity. Children learn to speak through experience and repetition, not through decoding a genetic manual. The circuits for speech and syntax are shaped by use, not prewritten rules. Chimpanzees, for example, can learn dozens of signs or symbols. They grasp rudimentary combinations—basic syntax—but never develop fluent speech. Their vocalisations are tightly linked to emotional states and lack the voluntary control seen in humans. Lieberman takes this as evidence that while some linguistic capacities are shared with other primates, speech as humans know it is a uniquely evolved trait, supported by changes in brain anatomy, vocal structure, and cognitive flexibility. Ultimately, human language is not just a function of cerebral complexity—it is an echo of much older patterns, reassembled for new purposes. The voice, the sentence, the pause between words: all of it emerges from neural machinery shaped long before humans learnt to talk.

Catching Language

Writing a grammar is not just a technical exercise—it is a human act of attention, respect, and memory. It asks the writer not only to describe how a language works but to find a way of speaking 'about' that language that remains faithful to its own logic. For many of the world's 6,000 languages, this task is not merely academic—it is a fight against forgetting. In 'Catching Language[133]', Nicholas Evans and Alan Dench describe grammar writing as a standing challenge: one that demands intellectual clarity, cultural humility, and a lot of patience. At first

[132] Lieberman, P. (2000) .Human Language and Our Reptilian Brain: The Subcortical Bases of Speech, Syntax, and Thought. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[133] Evans, N. and Dench, A. (2006).Catching Language: The Standing Challenge of Grammar Writing. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

glance, grammar seems like a tidy system—rules, categories, examples. But the real work of capturing a language in its full complexity rarely fits neatly into a chart. A language breathes; it shifts in tone and rhythm, changes shape depending on who is speaking and who is listening. The challenge, then, is not only to be accurate but to be fair—to make space for variation, nuance, and contradiction. Grammars are often written for multiple audiences: linguists, yes, but also teachers, learners, and native speakers themselves. This can make writing feel like balancing on a wire. Make it too technical, and it becomes inaccessible; simplify too much, and it misrepresents the language. One must choose a path between abstraction and reality, between typology and storytelling. What makes the task harder is that many languages lack written traditions. That means the grammar writer cannot rely on old books or documents. They need to listen, to ask questions, to gather hours of recorded speech. Sometimes, they are helped by native speakers who have never seen their language written down. These collaborators become co-authors in all but name—offering insight not just into pronunciation and grammar, but into rhythm, humor, memory, and gesture. Even the structure of a grammar—what comes first, what follows—must be chosen with care. Should the writer start with sounds and build up to meaning, or move from meaning down into the mechanics of expression? No answer is perfect. Languages do not unfold in order. People do not think in neat hierarchies. So, grammar writing becomes an act of translation in a deep sense: not just from one language to another, but from lived experience into structured explanation. Time, too, is a constraint. While the best grammars may take decades to complete, many are written under the pressure of short grants or limited fieldwork. The result is compromise: a careful selection of what can be shown clearly and what must be left for later. Still, even partial grammars can preserve a linguistic world that might otherwise vanish. Grammar writing is about catching language not like a butterfly pinned to a page, but like a story held in memory—part analysis, part preservation, part quiet love for the voices of others.

Evolution, learning, practice

In 'Creating Language: Integrating Evolution, Acquisition, and Processing[134]' (2022), Morten H. Christiansen and Nick Chater argue that language did not emerge fully formed or in isolation, but evolved gradually through the interplay of biological evolution, learning processes, and real-time communication. It is the outcome of countless fleeting interactions—moment-to-moment exchanges that leave behind cognitive impressions, shaping how people speak, learn, and understand. Over generations, these traces become patterns. Some fade, others stabilise, and what remains slowly congeals into grammar, vocabulary, and meaning. In this sense, language is less like a fixed system and more like a living memory of past conversations, gradually refined by the pressures of use, understanding, and transmission. But this view is often obscured by how language has traditionally been studied. In many linguistic traditions, knowledge is neatly divided: grammar is one domain, usage another; evolution belongs to biology, while acquisition falls under psychology. The result is a fragmented picture, where separate fields develop theories in isolation, often speaking past one another. This fragmentation, however, may be more of a theoretical convenience than a reflection of how language works. The distinction between competence (the knowledge of language) and performance (its use) is a good example. While helpful for building idealised models, it risks missing the point that these two are tightly interwoven. The rules people 'know' are deeply shaped by what their minds can handle in real time. The human brain must process language

[134] Christiansen, M.H. and Chater, N. (2022).Creating Language: Integrating Evolution, Acquisition, and Processing. Cambridge: MIT Press.

fast—sometimes too fast to wait for perfectly constructed sentences. This 'Now-or-Never bottleneck' forces listeners to grab meaning in chunks, to process and move on. Over time, these pressures mold the form of language itself, favouring patterns that are easier to handle and remember. Language acquisition, similarly, has often been treated as something separate from language processing—as though children somehow infer abstract rules without speaking or listening. But learning to speak is learning to process. It is a skill, honed by repetition, social interaction, and feedback. Children pick up patterns, not through deduction from grammatical first principles, but through messy, immersive use. Even second-language learners—often used to support theories of innate grammar—show that general cognitive skills, like pattern recognition and memory, are more critical than any built-in language module. This perspective also reshapes how language evolution is understood. Rather than seeing genetic evolution and cultural change as entirely separate, it becomes clear that language's development was driven more by culture than biology. Genes did not program specific rules or syntax; instead, they enabled the kind of flexible cognition and social learning that made language possible. The actual structure of language—the grammar people use today—emerged from cumulative cultural adaptation, shaped by what minds could process and what mouths could say. In the end, what emerges is a vision of language as deeply integrated: a continuous loop between evolution, learning, and processing. To split these apart is to miss their mutual influence. Reconnecting these domains allows for a richer understanding, one that does not try to reduce language to static systems but appreciates it as a dynamic process, rooted in interaction, shaped by memory, and sculpted by time.

Why do we want to talk?

People do not talk just to pass on facts. They speak to connect, to express, to be heard and understood. In 'Why Do We Want to Talk?[135]', Katerina Semendeferi explores how the urge to communicate is not only about intellect but also about emotion. Her work suggests that language, in its full human form, could not have evolved without deep changes in the parts of the brain that handle feelings, motivation, and social understanding. When comparing the human brain with that of our closest relatives—chimpanzees and other great apes—Semendeferi finds no completely new brain regions. Instead, evolution subtly reshaped structures already in place. The amygdala, involved in emotional reactions, became more specialised. The orbitofrontal cortex, which helps judge social situations, grew more complex. The anterior cingulate cortex, which handles motivation and error-checking, strengthened its ties to areas like Broca's region, associated with speech. These shifts, she argues, did not just make speech possible—they made people want to speak. Language became possible not only because people could form sentences, but because they cared about sharing, listening, and belonging. Semendeferi's evidence includes insights from disorders like Williams syndrome and autism. People with Williams syndrome, for example, often have strong verbal skills and an unusually high desire to socialise, even though they face cognitive challenges. Their brain structure reveals differences in the same emotional and motivational regions tied to speech in neurotypical people. On the other hand, individuals on the autism spectrum often show challenges in social and emotional communication—again pointing to how central the emotional brain is to the way language works in human life. Semendeferi also notes that the shift from gestures to speech was not just mechanical. It likely followed a deeper rewiring in

[135] Semendeferi, K. (2020) 'Why Do We Want to Talk? Evolution of Neural Substrates of Emotion and Social Cognition', in Arbib, M. A. (ed.) .How the Brain Got Language: Towards a New Road Map. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

how humans processed others' feelings and intentions. The hands might have come first, but it was the heart—more specifically, the emotional brain—that pushed communication into the rich symbolic realm we now call language. The road to speech, in this view, ran through the need to cooperate, nurture, warn, and reassure. It was not simply a cognitive arms race—it was a social one. The human infant's long dependency may have demanded more intricate emotional attunement. That meant the brain had to grow not only in size, but in the ability to connect feeling with expression. Semendeferi's approach suggests that people talk not just because they can, but because something in their emotional makeup compels them to. Language, then, is not simply a tool, but an extension of the emotional self—shaped not only by thought, but by care, desire, and the longing to be understood.

Cooperation or display?

People talk far more than they need to. Most conversations are not about solving problems or conveying crucial facts; they drift through memories, opinions, and stories with no clear goal. Yet this casual chatter fills a third of the average person's waking life. The real mystery, as Jean-Louis Dessalles argues in 'Why Talk?[136]', is not how language works—it is why people bother so much. Traditional answers fall short. Explaining language as a tool for coordination, teaching, or hunting does not account for the sheer volume of everyday conversation, especially when it involves trivial or repetitive topics. If the goal is efficiency, why the endless retelling of minor events? Why do people debate for hours, knowing they will not change each other's minds? Dessalles suggests language is less about cooperation and more about 'display'. Not physical display, like in animals, but cognitive and emotional display. Through storytelling and argument, people signal to others that they are aware, attentive, trustworthy, and intelligent. Talking is a way to attract social allies, not unlike a peacock's feathers or a songbird's call—but here, the plumage is narrative skill and reasoned thought. Everyday speech splits roughly into two forms: narratives and discussions. Stories are often emotional or surprising—someone got lost, something unexpected happened, a plan went wrong. The best stories are not just informative; they are 'striking' This quality reveals something about the speaker's attentiveness to the world and sensitivity to social dynamics. A person who spots unusual things may also notice danger early or catch social cues others miss. That is a valuable ally. Then come the discussions—less emotional, more about contradictions, beliefs, or decisions. Should someone be blamed for a mistake? Was that event intentional or random? People debate not just to find answers, but to show they can think clearly, weigh arguments, and stick to their position under pressure. This too becomes a signal—of consistency, logic, and trustworthiness. What makes this dynamic possible is a shift in the rules of survival. For much of primate evolution, dominance and physical strength determined success. But humans changed that. The invention of tools and weapons meant that sheer force no longer guaranteed safety. One's survival increasingly depended on having allies—people who would warn of danger, share resources, and help when needed. In this new order, language offered a unique advantage. Words became a way to 'show' one's value to the group: emotional honesty, cleverness, and moral clarity could be expressed, judged, and remembered. Instead of fighting for rank, people talked. The best talkers did not just entertain—they earned loyalty and respect. That is why people still talk so much. It is not about facts or instructions; it is about positioning. In modern life, this has not gone away—it is moved to other arenas. Social media, for example, is full of stories and arguments designed to draw attention, show insight, or signal virtue. The instinct to speak and

[136] Dessalles, J.-L. (2007).Why Talk?. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

be heard remains strong, not because it is always useful, but because it once helped people survive—and still helps them belong.

1.2. Collective fictions

(From pretend to protocol: The social life of collective fictions)

'We live in a world of shared fictions. Money, states, corporations—they exist because we believe in them'.

— Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind

'Declarations do not describe reality, they change it'.

— John Searle, The Construction of Social Reality

Children's pretence

At first glance, language seems like a straightforward tool: words strung together to pass information from one mind to another. But when people say things like 'you're hired', or 'this land belongs to me', they are changing reality. In 'Language and Collective Fiction: From Children's Pretence to Social Institutions[137]', Emily Wyman explores how language becomes powerful not because of its content alone, but because of the shared social agreement that gives certain utterances force. How do humans manage to treat fiction—agreed-upon stories—as real enough to structure entire institutions? This starts in childhood. When children play pretend, and one says, 'this stick is a sword', the other goes along with it, often correcting those who break the shared illusion. Even in play, children enforce imaginary rules. Wyman sees this as more than fun—it is early training in social imagination. Children are learning how shared intention can turn ordinary objects into meaningful roles or symbols. It is a rehearsal for the adult world, where similar symbolic agreements create money, marriage, or national borders. Language is the key to this transformation. Unlike a painting or a scream, language does not present an experience—it gives instructions for imagining one. When someone hears 'the king is dead', they do not need to see the body; the phrase itself directs the mind to picture what it means. This ability to imagine, and to trust others to imagine with you, is what makes language a technology of collective fiction. These fictions—like the idea of property or citizenship—become institutional facts only when enough people agree to treat them as real. Wyman emphasises that these institutional facts do not float free of context. They exist because people agree to follow certain rules. A paper slip counts as money in each economy, or a specific phrase counts as a legal contract in a courtroom. Without shared agreement, the paper is just paper, and the words are just sounds. What is remarkable is that humans, even from an early age, are wired to enforce these rules. They object when others break the shared illusion—not because the facts are physical, but because they have entered a shared reality with expectations and obligations. This intersubjective space, where everyone acts 'as if' something is real, is the foundation of institutions. By looking at how children move from pretend play into more culturally specific forms of role-playing—shopping, school, ceremonies—Wyman shows how these imaginative exercises prepare them to step into adult institutions. Over time, collective

[137] Wyman, E. (2017).Language and Collective Fiction: From Children's Pretence to Social Institutions. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

fiction becomes second nature, blending imagination with rule-following to create durable social structures. Language is not just a mirror of the world—it is the tool people use to build new worlds together.

Collective inventions

What makes human language unique is not just its structure, but the kind of world it brings into being. Unlike animal communication, which deals with immediate, physical realities—food, danger, territory—language creates shared symbolic worlds. It allows people to act not only based on what is, but on what could be or what is agreed to be so. In 'The Cradle of Language[138]', Chris Knight argues that language is not a spontaneous mutation in individual brains, but a cultural invention born out of social cooperation and collective imagination. Language is often described as digital: it is made of clear, categorical units like phonemes and words, allowing infinite meanings to emerge from finite parts. Yet humans are analogue creatures—emotional, embodied, and prone to ambiguity. So how did such a crisp, rule-based system take hold? Knight suggests that this digital scaffolding did not evolve biologically first. It emerged socially. Early humans developed symbolic practices—rituals, taboos, and shared performances—that gradually turned into systems of meaning. These practices were not just decorative or entertaining; they stabilised trust and enabled social rules to form. One striking example Knight gives is the use of red ochre by early humans. Found at many archaeological sites, it seems to have functioned as a cultural symbol, perhaps marking transitions, fertility, or group identity. The point is not what ochre meant, but that it meant something collectively. Its use helped shift early human groups from instinctive behaviour to shared social contracts, from dominance to cooperation. These collective rituals laid the groundwork for symbolic culture, where meaning is no longer tied to immediate biological signals but to social consensus. Crucially, Knight connects the rise of symbolic culture with the management of reproductive cycles. In early societies, menstruation may have served not just as a biological fact but as a social signal, governed by taboos and rituals. These taboos helped regulate sexual behaviour and competition, promoting group cohesion. Women, through collective practices, may have been central to this shift. By synchronising behaviour around visible signs, groups could create rules—agreements that go beyond brute facts. Language, in this view, did not appear out of nowhere; it grew out of rituals that taught people how to mean things together. This idea has important consequences for how we think about speech. In evolutionary terms, speech is a remarkably cheap and fast way to communicate. Unlike physical gestures or signals, words cost almost nothing to produce. Yet they work—because people agree to treat them as meaningful. Language, then, depends on shared belief and trust. Without social rituals and the rule of law behind them, words would be just air. Knight challenges the view that language is mainly a brain-based module that emerged through a rare mutation. Instead, he suggests that language came from the outside in—from social life to the mind. It was invented, not discovered, and it required a collective shift in how humans lived, imagined, and trusted one another.

Social origins of language

Understanding the origins of language requires more than a biological account—it demands a rethinking of language as a fundamentally social phenomenon. In 'The Social

[138] Botha, R.P. and Knight, C. (2009). The cradle of language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Origins of Language[139]', edited by Daniel Dor, Chris Knight, and Jerome Lewis, the authors present a compelling interdisciplinary challenge to dominant theories that isolate language within the brain or treat it as a genetic mutation. Instead, they explore how language emerged from the evolving dynamics of human social life, where cooperation, trust, and cultural innovation created the conditions for symbolic communication to take root and flourish. The book opens by acknowledging the deep mystery surrounding language origins—long considered one of the most difficult problems in science. Because no direct evidence of early language use exists, researchers must rely on circumstantial clues: fossils, archaeological traces, primate studies, and child development. Despite these challenges, the contributors argue that the rewards of inquiry are immense. Language is not only a cognitive faculty but a social achievement that defines human identity and moral responsibility. Traditional theories, especially those derived from Noam Chomsky's view of language as an innate internal faculty (I-language), emphasise grammar as a product of biology and evolution. These theories tend to treat communication as secondary, focusing instead on language as a medium for private thought. The contributors to this volume dispute that framing, proposing instead that language evolved as a solution to the challenges of cooperative life. Speech, they argue, is inherently public. It allows people not just to think but to share and reconstruct each other's thoughts in a process of collective understanding. A key insight is that evolutionary change is often behaviour-driven. Social innovations—such as collaborative childcare, the use of fire, and ritualised bonding—likely preceded and enabled the genetic and cognitive developments that support language. In this sense, language did not emerge in isolation but as part of a broader transformation in human social life. The shift from dominance-based primate hierarchies to trust-based human societies created a space where language could function as a reliable, symbolic system. Ultimately, the book presents language not as a solitary invention or sudden mutation but as a deeply social technology. Its emergence depended on a collective environment marked by shared intentionality, mutual trust, and the ability to transmit symbolic meaning across generations. The human capacity for language is not merely cognitive—it is cultural, ethical, and cooperative at its core.

A communication technology

Language, rather than being merely a biological faculty or an abstract cognitive mechanism, can be understood as a socially constructed communication technology. In 'The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Communication Technology[140]', Daniel Dor proposes that language emerged not as a fixed evolutionary trait but as a tool developed by human communities to solve a specific communicative problem: how to share experiences that are inherently private and subjective. Every individual experiences the world through a unique lens—through memories, thoughts, sensations, and perceptions. This experiential variability creates a fundamental challenge for communication. Traditional systems like gestures, facial expressions, or even visual art rely on shared context or direct presentation of experience. They reduce the communicative gap by pointing to things already perceived. Language, by contrast, operates differently: it provides structured 'instructions' that allow listeners to 'imagine' the speaker's experience. This process, which Dor calls the 'instruction of imagination', is the distinctive feature that sets language apart from other forms of symbolic communication. Dor views language as a dual system: a 'symbolic landscape' of shared meanings developed through

[139] Dor, D., Knight, C. and Lewis, J. (eds.) (2014).The Social Origins of Language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[140] Dor, D. (2015).The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Communication Technology. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

cultural interaction, and a 'communication protocol'—a flexible, community-based set of rules guiding how these symbols are used. These two components enable individuals to encode fragments of their experience into language, and for listeners to reconstruct these fragments into imagined, internally coherent representations. Language thus acts as a bridge across the experiential divide between speaker and listener. The instructive strategy likely emerged within pre-linguistic hominin societies already proficient in mimetic and gestural communication. As these communities grew more complex—sharing childcare, hunting cooperatively, and navigating distributed knowledge systems—they encountered increasingly difficult communicative demands. They needed to talk about absent objects, invisible relationships, future plans, or moral obligations. These could not be gestured at or shown. Instead, individuals began experimenting with instructive forms of communication, offering partial cues that relied on the listener's ability to reconstruct meaning. As these attempts stabilised, they produced a new communicative technology: language. The process was gradual but directional. Communities began expanding their shared symbolic repertoire, standardising vocal signals, and developing phonological and grammatical rules. The linear combination of discrete symbols into sequences allowed for hierarchical structures and recursive meaning—enabling an exponential increase in expressive power. Seen in this light, language is not an evolutionary accident or a sudden cognitive leap, but a cumulative social innovation. It is comparable to other technologies—such as writing or the internet—in that it solves a specific problem: how to transfer information across minds with minimal shared experience. This understanding reframes language not as a mirror of thought, but as a tool that reshapes both thinking and society. By conceptualising language as a communication technology, Dor's work highlights the cooperative, imaginative, and technical nature of language, emphasising that its origins lie not just in brains, but in communities striving to understand each other.

For a long time, the story of language's beginnings was framed as a sudden leap—something that arrived hand-in-hand with art, tools, and the 'modern human'. But what if that leap was a long walk? In 'The Emergence of Modern Language and Its Implications[141]', Dan Dediu and Stephen Levinson argue that modern language did not burst into existence 40,000 years ago. Instead, it grew slowly, shaped over hundreds of thousands—maybe even a million—years, by human social life, interaction, and cultural change. Language, they suggest, is inseparable from the way people live together. It is not just a brain function—it is a social tool, born in the messiness of cooperation. Early humans did not need perfect grammar to survive. They needed to share plans, warn each other, make sense of strange events. Language is a patchwork technology, stitched together through social needs. Over time, early humans expanded their 'symbolic landscape'—categorising experience, naming it, telling stories. As these linguistic habits were passed on, they grew more complex. Cultural ratcheting—the idea that once something useful appears, it can be refined by later generations—played a key role. Language was not just evolving in brains; it was evolving in communities. Language not just what people speak. It is what they inherit, shape, and use to build the world around them.

Language and normativity

People do not just speak—they follow rules when they speak. And when someone breaks one of those unspoken rules, the disruption is immediately felt. Someone talks over another, does not say thank you, interrupts the turn-taking rhythm, or misuses a word, and suddenly the smooth flow of interaction stutters. In 'Forever United: The Co-Evolution of Language and

[141] Dediu, D. and Levinson, S.C. (2013).The Emergence of Modern Language and Its Implications. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Normativity[142]', Ehud Lamm argues that this shared sense of 'how things should be done'—in both communication and conduct—is not just a feature of human life. It is part of what made human life possible in the first place. The core idea is simple but powerful: language and norms did not evolve separately. They grew together, shaping each other, and they still do. Norms are not just rules we learn; they are ways of making life together manageable. And language is not just a way of expressing thought—it is one of the main ways humans create, spread, and enforce norms. Think about how children learn to speak. It is not just about naming things. They are learning when it is okay to speak, how to take turns, how to say 'mine' or 'please', and what is funny or polite. These early uses of language are packed with normativity. A toddler saying 'bye' and insisting everyone else does too is not just using a word—they are enforcing a social ritual. They have internalised a rule, and it matters to them that others follow it too. Lamm illustrates this beautifully through the example of a child named Dora, whose early words were embedded in social routines. 'Up' was not just a label for direction; it was a request, a command, a shared expectation. 'Mine' was not just about possession—it was about fairness, about asserting rights in a world full of others. Through games, greetings, and small emotional dramas, Dora was not just learning to talk. She was stepping into a world of shared norms. What's striking is how quickly children go from mimicry to moral feeling. They do not just imitate; they care. They get frustrated when others break the rules—rules no one had to spell out. And that emotional response is a clue to something deeper. Lamm suggests that this early moral sensitivity is not just social conditioning. It is part of what makes language work. If you do not care when someone lies or cheats or breaks the rhythm, you cannot build trust. And without trust, language collapses. Over evolutionary time, this link between speech and shared expectations deepened. New ways of talking—commands, questions, promises—evolved alongside new ways of regulating behaviour. Groups that could talk through problems, reason about fairness, and create new rules together had an edge. Language did not just help them cooperate; it helped them build cultures. Language and normativity are two sides of the same human coin. They grew up together in our species—and still grow together in every child.

The social evolution

In 'The Social Evolution of Human Nature: From Biology to Language[143]', Harry Smit challenges traditional theories of language evolution, particularly those grounded in the Chomskyan idea of an innate, genetically encoded Universal Grammar. Instead of imagining language as a system for encoding internal thoughts into external signals, Smit proposes a more grounded alternative: language emerged from social action, from doing things with words. This view aligns language not with abstract rules hardwired in the brain, but with the very fabric of cooperative behaviour in early human societies. Rather than a pre-existing language faculty, Smit argues that early humans developed communicative behaviours out of the need to coordinate group actions—like hunting, caregiving, or sharing food. From gestures like pointing and miming, early humans gradually moved toward vocalisations, extending the range and flexibility of communication. This process, deeply embedded in social life, formed the basis for symbolic expression and language. One of the key strengths of Smit's account is how it situates language evolution within the broader framework of biological and cultural development. Instead of invoking mysterious internal 'states' or inaccessible cognitive structures, he examines how language emerged from observable patterns of interaction. Infants'

[142] Lamm, E. (2023).Forever United: The Co-Evolution of Language and Normativity. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[143] Smit, H. (2014).The Social Evolution of Human Nature: From Biology to Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

early communicative behaviours—gaze-following, babbling, pointing—are seen as evolutionary adaptations that anticipate language. These behaviours do not encode abstract knowledge; they foster relationships, teaching, and cooperation. Smit also critiques how Chomsky's model detaches linguistic knowledge from actual linguistic ability. He draws on medical cases like aphasia to show that language is better understood as an ability—something that can be lost, relearnt, or modified—rather than a stored state or static system. The recovery of speech after brain injury suggests that language is tied to functional mechanisms, not buried knowledge. This insight brings the study of language closer to biology, where abilities are developed through interaction between structure, function, and environment. Furthermore, Smit connects the evolution of language with changes in human life history. Early weaning and cooperative child-rearing necessitated greater communicative abilities, particularly between mothers, infants, and other caregivers. Language, in this view, developed as a tool for coordinating social life, not translating inner thoughts. Smit's proposal is that language evolved gradually from shared gestures and vocal behaviours, expanding to symbolic representation through increased social complexity. It was not a sudden biological leap, but a continuous cultural process shaped by the pressures of cooperation, teaching, and coordination. The human capacity for language reflects not a specialised organ but a flexible set of social behaviours deeply rooted in our evolutionary history.

Why do only humans have language?

Language is often seen as humanity's defining feature. While many animals communicate, only humans developed a full, open-ended language system. Robin Dunbar, in his 'Why Only Humans Have Language[144]' (2007), offers a compelling explanation: language evolved not as a technical tool for problem-solving, but as a social glue that bound early humans into larger, more cohesive communities. The starting point for this idea lies in the limitations of grooming, the main method non-human primates use to build and maintain social bonds. Grooming is time-consuming and one-on-one; in large groups, it quickly becomes inefficient. Humans, though, manage to maintain stable social groups three times the size of any other primate. Dunbar argues that this leap was not possible without a new mechanism. Language, he suggests, filled this gap by allowing multiple people to bond simultaneously through shared conversation, gossip, and storytelling. This view challenges older models that framed language primarily to exchange technical information—like how to make a tool or find food. While language certainly supports those uses, Dunbar shows that most human conversation (in every culture studied) is overwhelmingly social. People talk about relationships, reputation, emotions—precisely the kind of information needed to navigate a complex social world. One strength of Dunbar's approach is its evolutionary coherence. As hominin brain size increased, especially in regions like the neocortex, cognitive capacity expanded. This allowed for deeper layers of intentionality—thinking about what others are thinking. These advanced social skills demand sophisticated communication. Without language, the mental effort required to manage relationships in groups of one hundred or more would become unsustainable. Fossil records support this account. By around 500,000 years ago, humans had developed the anatomical features necessary for speech: changes in the spine for breath control, and modifications in the skull and jaw for articulating sounds. While it is hard to say exactly when language in its modern form emerged, these developments suggest a gradual transition from simple vocal signals to full grammar. Dunbar also compares competing theories, like those proposing that language

[144] Dunbar, R. (2007) 'Why Only Humans Have Language', in Botha, R. and Knight, C. (eds.).The Prehistory of Language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

evolved to impress mates or establish contracts. While these may explain certain aspects of language use, they fall short of explaining how language solves the core problem of social cohesion in large groups. Language enables flexible, fast, and nuanced bonding, and that, according to Dunbar, is its most critical evolutionary function. Ultimately, what sets humans apart is not just that they speak, but that they live in dense, layered social worlds where talk is essential. Language is not just a mechanism—it is the very medium of human society.

Social manipulation

When people talk about how language evolved, the focus is often on cooperation—how humans learnt to share thoughts, work together, and build communities through words. But as Federico Rossano points out in 'Social Manipulation, Turn-Taking, and Cooperation in Apes[145]', cooperation is not always rooted in kindness. Sometimes, it is about strategy. And when it comes to apes—our closest living relatives—the desire to communicate often has less to do with generosity and more to do with subtle control. Rossano's work suggests that if we want to understand the origins of language, we need to look beyond the words themselves. It is not just what is said or how it's understood—it is also why one responds in the first place. This means studying the motives that drive interaction: the push to get something, to influence behaviour, or to maintain a social bond. In the animal world, especially among apes, these motives often involve manipulation rather than cooperation for its own sake. Take turn-taking, for instance. In humans, conversation flows in rapid, coordinated exchanges. But in apes, simpler versions exist too. Young chimpanzees repeat gestures back and forth. Orangutans sometimes take turns offering or withholding food. These are not complex dialogues, but they show early forms of coordinated interaction. Rossano categorises these behaviours from basic mimicry to more interpretive exchanges where gestures are used purposefully to elicit a response. It is here that the link to human language begins to show. Manipulation is especially telling. Orangutan mothers, for example, will use their offspring as social tools—nudging them to retrieve food or to test others' reactions. These are not acts of selfless teaching. They are calculated moves within a larger social game. Similarly, gestures that seem like requests for help often function as probes, revealing the strength of a relationship or testing what another ape is willing to give. This sheds light on a deeper point: the origins of language may be as much about influencing others as they are about exchanging information. Rossano outlines two views—one that sees communication as manipulation, and another that sees it as a system for sharing facts. The truth likely blends both. Apes use signals to get what they want, but also to navigate social life in ways that resemble early human interaction. The key lesson is that cooperation does not always need goodwill. It can emerge from shared interest or even from self-interest. This challenges the idea that language could only evolve in deeply altruistic settings. Instead, it may have emerged in environments where strategy and social navigation were just as crucial. By studying how apes manage turn-taking, test boundaries, and use social tools, Rossano paints a more nuanced picture of where language came from. It was not just built on empathy—it was built on the complex, often messy reality of social life.

[145] Rossano, F. (2020) 'Social Manipulation, Turn-Taking, and Cooperation in Apes: Implications for the Evolution of Language-Based Interaction in Humans', in Arbib, M. A. (ed.).How the Brain Got Language: Towards a New Road Map. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Origins of culture

What separates a mind from a brain? For Robert K. Logan, the answer lies in language. In 'The Extended Mind Model: The Origins of Language and Culture[146]', Logan proposes that language did not merely evolve to help humans describe the world—it created an entirely new way of thinking. It extended the reach of the brain into a shared conceptual space, where abstract thought, cooperation, and culture could take root. Long before grammar or alphabets, humans faced challenges no other species had: complex social structures, shared hunting strategies, tools that required planning, fire that demanded control. These pressures overloaded the perceptual systems that once sufficed for survival. Something had to give. That 'something' was language—not as a sudden invention, but as a tipping point, a bifurcation from simple perception to concept-based reasoning. In Logan's model, this was not just a cognitive upgrade; it was a transformation in how minds were organised. The early words people spoke did not describe things with precision. Instead, they worked like magnets—or as Logan puts it, 'strange attractors'—pulling together many different experiences under a single sign. A word like 'water' did not just mean H_2O; it brought together rain, thirst, rivers, and danger. Words simplified life's chaos by giving it shape, and in doing so, created new ways of understanding. Language, then, is not just spoken—it is shared. Its power does not lie in the individual mind but in the mutual recognition of meaning. This means context is everything. Say something with a smile, and it softens; say the same words in writing, and they stiffen. This dynamic quality makes language both fluid and fragile. Only through trust, convention, and repeated use does it become stable enough to build on. Before speech, Logan argues, humans relied on three proto-languages. Toolmaking brought a sense of sequence—one step must follow another. Social behaviour added structure through grooming, sharing, and coordination. And mimetic gestures—hand signals, facial expressions, postures—became early signs with meaning. These proto-languages helped humans practice pattern recognition and symbolic logic before they ever opened their mouths. The real leap came when concepts took over. Where once a person reacted to a sound or shape, now they could think in symbols, in metaphors, in layered meanings. This leap did not just change communication; it changed people. The 'mind' was born when the brain merged with language—when cognition became distributed, not just inside skulls, but between them. Logan sees three turning points in this process: the move from perception to abstraction, from biology to culture, from archaic hominins to symbol-using humans. In each case, language was the catalyst. And though other species had bigger brains, it was humans—with this strange tool of shared meaning—who reshaped the planet.

Evolution of ultrasociality

Why do humans speak, and why do they speak the way they do? In his chapter from 'Is Sociality a Crucial Prerequisite for the Emergence of Language?[147]', Luc Steels explores the idea that language evolved not simply as a cognitive tool, but as a dynamic social process deeply rooted in human cooperation and interaction. He does not approach this through speculation but through theoretical modeling, using simulations and experiments with robots and artificial agents to investigate how communication systems might have first emerged and evolved. Steels argues that language is a 'complex adaptive system'—a living, evolving network that responds to pressures from both individuals and communities. Unlike rigid, rule-based models like

[146] Logan, R.K. (2007).The Extended Mind Model: The Origins of Language and Culture. University of Toronto.

[147] Steels, L. (2022) 'The Evolution of Ultrasociality', in "Is Sociality a Crucial Prerequisite for the Emergence of Language?" Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Universal Grammar, this view sees language as flexible and constantly shifting. People do not just follow grammatical rules handed down to them; they innovate, adjust, and repair communication when it breaks down. When someone invents a new word, others adapt to it. Over time, these small adjustments accumulate into stable patterns—a process that mirrors natural selection more than it does top-down instruction. At the heart of Steels' model is the idea of 'repair strategies'. These are the spontaneous efforts speakers make to clarify, rephrase, or negotiate meaning during a conversation. As these strategies become regularised, they shape the grammar and structure of a language. This does not just happen in ancient history—it is something that still unfolds today in the development of new languages, such as creoles, or in contexts where communication is impaired and rebuilt from scratch. To test these ideas, Steels uses 'language games'—simulations where robotic agents try to develop communication systems from scratch. Starting with no shared code, the agents interact, attempt to express things, and gradually invent and align signals. What is remarkable is that, with the right social dynamics, these agents develop properties like syntax, arbitrariness, and even perspective-taking—features central to human language. But it is not just the games that matter—it is the social rules they embed. Without 'joint attention', for example—where two individuals focus on the same thing—these systems collapse. Without the ability to reverse perspective and consider what the other agent might know or think, communication fails. And crucially, without mechanisms for trust and cooperation, like punishing deception or rewarding reliability, the entire communicative structure breaks down. Language does not emerge in isolation. It requires a deeply social environment: one where people are willing to engage, share focus, take others' perspectives, and even trust one another despite the risks. This is what Steels refers to as 'ultrasociality'—the kind of cooperative behaviour that goes far beyond kinship or self-interest. It is the glue that made symbolic culture, and ultimately language, possible.

Minds make societies

Human societies have always appeared both strangely familiar and deeply perplexing. We live immersed in them yet often fail to grasp why they function the way they do. Why, for example, do people care so much about ethnic identity? Why are beliefs—however irrational—so durable? Why does political domination seem so universally accepted? In his book 'Minds Make Societies[148]', Pascal Boyer suggests that to understand these puzzles, we must start not from abstract theory, but from the cognitive architecture of the human mind. The first step is to recognise that social life is not separate from nature. Human groups follow patterns that can be studied like any other biological phenomenon. But unlike rainfall or migration patterns, societies emerge from minds—specifically, minds shaped by evolution to handle certain recurrent problems. That is why answers to questions like 'Why are some societies more cooperative than others?' require us to look inward, at the cognitive mechanisms inherited from our ancestors. These mechanisms, however, do not work as centralised conscious systems. Rather, the mind operates through multiple specialised inference systems that process specific types of information: moral violations, social signals, threats, alliances. These systems function largely without awareness. People do not reason their way into moral outrage or group loyalty; they feel it, immediately and intuitively. This explains why behaviours that seem irrational—refusing to drink water from a glass labeled 'poison', or punishing someone for symbolic acts—are the result of ancient, fast-acting cognitive processes tuned to detect threats and protect cooperation. Even complex political behaviours, such as loyalty to a leader or compliance with

[148] Boyer, P. (2018). Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create. Yale University Press.

an unjust regime, emerge from systems designed to monitor status, alliances, and dominance. Individuals scan their environment for cues of who holds power, who might punish them, and which group norms are safe to follow. What looks like ideological belief may just be a computational shortcut: follow the leader who looks the most dominant, imitate the group that seems safest. Boyer argues that ethnic identity is not an inherited instinct but a byproduct of our mind's ability to track coalitions. From early childhood, humans are tuned to recognise alliances based on language, ritual, dress, and interaction patterns. Ethnicity becomes salient when these cues signal stable groups worth aligning with. When resources are scarce or competition is high, these cues can harden into rigid boundaries—producing the very conflicts societies often struggle to resolve. Importantly, morality is not a universal code handed down from on high but a dynamic response system. Moral intuitions are generated by mechanisms that detect cooperation, fairness, exploitation, and harm. These mechanisms vary in how they express themselves across cultures, but their underlying function remains the same: to regulate social life by rewarding helpful behaviour and punishing violations. Even our reproductive strategies—who we partner with, when we reproduce, and how we invest in children—are influenced by subtle environmental cues. Children growing up without a father, for example, may unconsciously adapt their strategies in ways that reflect expectations about long-term male support. These choices are not deliberate or reflective but emerge from evolved systems built to detect patterns and adjust behaviour accordingly. Understanding societies, then, is not about decoding abstract institutions or ideologies. It is about unpacking the invisible mental routines that shape human action—routines honed by natural selection to manage the social complexity that defines our species. When we see societies this way, not as mysteries or failures of rationality, but as expressions of ancient mental adaptations, we begin to make sense of even the strangest cultural practices. Societies do not emerge from abstract ideas, constitutions, or conscious planning. They emerge from minds—layered, fragmented, and ancient—that shape and are shaped by the groups they live in.

What is information for?

In 'Minds Make Societies', Pascal Boyer poses a provocative question: why do human minds, built for survival, consume and spread information that appears utterly useless or false? Rumours of satanic rituals in suburban schools, tales of supernatural organ theft, and beliefs in mind-controlling elites are all forms of what Boyer calls 'junk culture'. These beliefs are not marginal but widespread, recurring across time and geography. They persist not despite human cognitive sophistication, but because of it. Human cognition evolved to make rapid inferences under uncertainty. When gathering food, identifying threats, or navigating social alliances, information processing had to be fast, selective, and based on cues that reliably indicated danger or opportunity. These ancient mechanisms remain at work in modern environments saturated with language and media. The result is a mind that does not simply seek truth—it prioritises relevance, especially information that appears socially urgent or morally charged. This explains why rumours are so often about threats. Negative information carries more weight because missing a potential danger is far more costly than ignoring a harmless detail. Hence, false alarms—claims that someone is poisoning the water, kidnapping children, or stealing body parts—are widespread. Our minds are tuned to overreact to ambiguous signals of danger. Better to believe falsely and avoid risk than to dismiss something that might matter. In this sense, the spread of frightening rumours is not irrational but adaptive. They activate our attention systems, heighten vigilance, and promote social cohesion around shared concerns. But these rumours do more than alert. They mobilise. In many cases, as Boyer points out, people act on them, rallying around shared narratives that define heroes, victims, and villains. Once information is framed

in moral terms, it transforms from data into duty. People are no longer just listeners—they become participants, spreading the message not because it is verified, but because it signals loyalty, outrage, or a shared mission. This is what makes 'junk culture' paradoxically useful. It serves functions beyond truth-telling: it helps delineate group boundaries, enforce norms, and structure emotional energy. In the Satanic panic of the 1980s, accusations spread not because of evidence, but because they mapped onto moral fears about parenting, authority, and innocence. Similarly, beliefs in organ theft or black magic do not need proof to feel real—they become real through their social consequences: exclusion, punishment, cohesion. Boyer compares this phenomenon to 'junk DNA'—sequences that seem useless but might carry regulatory functions. In the same way, junk information appears irrational but may shape the emotional and moral architecture of human groups. It teaches people how to respond, whom to trust, and what to fear. And often, those who transmit such information gain status as protectors or insiders, regardless of the content's accuracy. So, what is information for? Not merely to mirror reality. Its role in human societies is to coordinate action, generate shared meaning, and secure group solidarity. The cost of being wrong, cognitively speaking, may be outweighed by the benefit of being together.

1.3. Social imagination

(From ritual to reality: The social roots of symbolic culture)

'There are things that count as real only because people agree to act as if they are'.

— John Searle, The Construction of Social Reality

'Symbolic culture depends not on tools or genes, but on the willingness to believe in shared fictions'.

— Chris Knight, Blood Relations

Symbolic culture

There is something strange about the world humans live in. It is filled with things that do not exist in any material sense—like promises, taboos, weddings, and gods—but still carry immense weight. People are willing to die for flags, feel ashamed over invisible rules, and structure their entire lives around stories that only exist because everyone agrees to treat them as real. In 'Language and Symbolic Culture: An Outcome of Hunter-Gatherer Reverse Dominance[149]', Chris Knight explores how this peculiar symbolic world emerged, and how language became its main vehicle. At the centre of Knight's argument is a fundamental question: How did humans come to live in a shared imagined reality? Unlike brute facts—like gravity or fire—that are true regardless of belief, symbolic facts only exist because people agree on them. Money has value because people act as if it does. A wedding vow matters because others recognise its authority. Language is one of the most powerful tools for holding these agreements together. Knight draws on a wide range of archaeological and anthropological sources to show that symbolic culture did not appear suddenly 50,000 years ago, as some older theories claimed. Instead, it emerged gradually, with signs of symbolic behaviour—like the use of red ochre or beadwork—appearing as far back as 164,000 years ago in Africa. These early

[149] Knight, C. (2023).Language and Symbolic Culture: An Outcome of Hunter-Gatherer Reverse Dominance. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

signs suggest people were already decorating themselves, engaging in rituals, and marking social roles through shared symbols, long before they migrated out of the continent. But how did this shared fiction become reliable? The answer lies in trust. Language is cheap—it costs little to say something—but trust is expensive. That is where rituals come in. Painful initiations, collective ceremonies, and costly displays of commitment helped establish strong bonds. Once trust was secured through these 'expensive' behaviours, the door opened for 'cheap' symbolic communication—like language—to function effectively. Knight connects this to what he calls reverse dominance. In early egalitarian hunter-gatherer groups, power was deliberately flattened. Dominant individuals were checked by coalitions, ensuring no single person could monopolise authority. Within this flat social structure, symbolic systems flourished—not despite the lack of hierarchy, but because of it. Everyone had to agree on the rules, which gave collective fictions their power. One of the most compelling parts of Knight's argument is the role of women. Drawing on Camilla Power's Female Cosmetic Coalition theory, he suggests that early female alliances—using body paint, ritual, and sexual signalling—played a key role in shaping symbolic behaviour. By concealing ovulation and synchronising menstrual cycles, women created collective rituals that disrupted male dominance and encouraged cooperative behaviour. These symbolic practices were not just decoration—they were strategic social tools. Language, in this light, was not simply a tool for expressing thought. It was born from the need to coordinate, to share fictions, and to live together in imagined orders. The symbolic world people inhabit today—with its laws, religions, and languages—is not a glitch in evolution. It is the outcome of deep social negotiation, where stories became real through collective belief.

Morality and intersubjectivity

What makes people not only live together, but care about each other, share values, and pass meaning from one generation to the next? In 'The Co-Evolution of Human Intersubjectivity, Morality, and Language[150]', Jordan Zlatev offers a powerful answer: humans did not evolve language first and morality later. Instead, the two—alongside deep emotional resonance between individuals—grew together, each shaping the other. At the heart of Zlatev's work is the idea that language is not just a code for sending information. It is a cooperative tool, and like any tool, it only works when people trust each other enough to use it. That trust, that sense of shared experience—what he calls 'intersubjectivity'—had to evolve before complex language could emerge. Without it, the words would fall flat. Humans, unlike their primate cousins, do not just react to one another. They share intentions, coordinate goals, and build collective meaning. Apes can be empathetic, sure, but their cooperation tends to be momentary and competitive. They do not follow shared rules or enforce social norms the way even young children do. That leap—from short-term cooperation to moral communities—was massive. And it did not happen through genes alone. Zlatev challenges the view that evolution is all about individuals passing on their DNA. He draws on 'multi-level selection' theory—the idea that evolution happens not just through individual competition, but through group cooperation. Groups that worked well together outlasted those that did not. This is where morality and language begin to make sense. Morality helps regulate the group. Language makes it possible to talk about what matters. To understand how this all began, Zlatev walks us through four major theories of human social evolution. Robin Dunbar saw language as a substitute for grooming—a way to bond with more people more efficiently. Terrence Deacon thought language and morality started as social contracts to regulate sex and food sharing. Michael

[150] Zlatev, J. (2023).The Co-Evolution of Human Intersubjectivity, Morality, and Language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tomasello emphasised joint attention and collaboration, while Sarah Hrdy focused on 'alloparenting'—when people other than mothers help raise children. For Hrdy, this shared care was the true beginning of human empathy. Each theory gives a different angle, but together they sketch a story of how humans became the species that could look one another in the eye and say, 'we're in this together'. From shared caregiving, to joint attention, to the enforcement of norms, to the invention of symbolic systems—this is the chain that leads to language as we know it. Zlatev's most powerful insight may be this: the systems that make language and morality possible are fragile. If people stop raising children together, if society fragments into isolated individuals, those systems do not just weaken—they can disappear. Just like a fish in a cave loses its eyes when there is nothing left to see, humans risk losing the very qualities that made language—and moral life—possible in the first place.

Memory and imagination

In 'Memory, Imagination, and the Evolution of Modern Language[151]' Simona Ginsburg and Eva Jablonka argue that the roots of human language extend well beyond the mere transmission of facts, emerging instead from complex interactions between memory, imagination, and evolving cognitive capacities. What makes language unique is not just its capacity to communicate—it is how deeply it entangles memory, imagination, and play. In early human communities, the ability to recall past events, imagine new ones, and share them with others did not evolve in isolation. These faculties grew together, shaping one another into the rich, symbolic communication we now recognise as language. Long before writing or even structured grammar, early 'Homo' species already displayed signs of complex behaviour. They built tools, controlled fire, and lived in cooperative social groups. Such tasks demanded more than instinct—they required memory strong enough to store past events and imagination flexible enough to rehearse what might come next. This imaginative recall, made communicable through vocal sounds and gestures, gave rise to what could be called a proto-language: a system of signs capable of guiding others' attention not just to the present, but to remembered or imagined experiences. Language, in this view, became a kind of 'imagination-sharing' device. Unlike animals whose signals mostly refer to immediate situations—danger here, food there—humans developed the cognitive infrastructure to use words for absent things, for episodes long past, or plans not yet real. This required two types of memory: semantic memory (shared knowledge, like word meanings) and episodic memory (the personal recall of lived events). These forms of memory became entwined with language, allowing humans to speak of the past, predict outcomes, and create fiction. One of the main training grounds for this imaginative capacity was play. Human childhood, unusually long compared to other species, offers space for pretend scenarios where children rehearse social roles, symbolic ideas, and linguistic patterns. A stick becomes a sword, a word like 'mine' marks territory, and a story becomes a shared world. Pretend play teaches children not only to use language, but to understand its power to shape reality in the minds of others. Crucially, memory and imagination are not perfectly accurate. They are flexible, constructive processes. That flexibility is a strength—it lets people piece together fragments, infer motives, invent solutions—but it also introduces confusion. Children often mix up what they experienced with what they were told. This 'source amnesia' shows how closely memory and language are intertwined: stories become personal memories, and imagined events take on the texture of lives lived. Over time, such cognitive blurring likely gave rise to new social tools: autobiographical memory, narrative identity, and

[151] Ginsburg, S. and Jablonka, E. (2022).Memory, Imagination, and the Evolution of Modern Language. Cambridge: MIT Press.

the cultural transmission of values through myth and storytelling. Thus, language did not emerge out of thin air, nor as a singular adaptation. It arose from a deep interweaving of memory, imagination, and play—woven through generations of cooperative caregiving, social learning, and childhood exploration. In telling stories, humans do not just pass information; they pass worlds. And in those shared imagined worlds, language found its most fertile soil.

Mental travels

The power to speak about things not here, not now, maybe not even real—this ability defines human language. What makes it possible is something deeper than vocabulary or grammar: a mental faculty called 'mental time travel'. Michael C. Corballis, in 'Mental Travels and the Cognitive Basis of Language[152]', explores how this capacity to mentally revisit the past, imagine the future, or construct fiction helped lay the groundwork for language itself. Think of language as more than a tool—it is a bridge between minds, stretching across space and time. People do not just describe what they see; they tell stories, make promises, warn of dangers yet to come, and explain how things used to be. This all relies on being able to hold an image of something that is not right in front of you, and to trust that someone else can do the same. Mental time travel, though often thought uniquely human, seems to have faint traces in other animals. Corvids remember where they have hidden food and when it will spoil. Chimps can prepare tools for future use. Rats in mazes show neural activity that mimics routes they have taken—or might take. These behaviours suggest evolution did not hand humans a brand-new mind but rather stretched and reshaped an older one. At the centre of all this is the hippocampus—a structure involved in memory and imagination. In humans, it is active when reliving a memory or inventing a new story. In rats, it fires in patterns that suggest they are running through past or future paths. The architecture of memory and simulation is shared across species, but humans seem to have taken it further, building from it a world of language, culture, and meaning. Language did not just appear—it likely co-evolved with this mental wandering. As humans began to live in larger groups, plan farther ahead, and rely more on cooperation, the need to share not just facts but scenarios became essential. You cannot hunt mammoths or survive a winter migration without coordinating plans that do not yet exist. And once that need appeared, language had room to grow. The development of the theory of mind—realising that others have thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge—also played a role. If you can guess what someone else is thinking, you can tailor what you say. You can lie, persuade, or teach. This recursive awareness—'I know that you know that I know'—is a cornerstone of meaningful language. All this likely crystallised during the Pleistocene. As tools became more complex and social bonds more vital, mental time travel and language pushed each other forward. Language gave thought shape. Thought gave language purpose. What makes language so powerful is not just that it helps humans survive—it is that it lets them share worlds that have not happened yet. The past, the future, even fiction—all become real in conversation.

How did trusted talk began?

Before words became a bridge between minds, communication was a simpler matter—instinct, reaction, survival. In 'The Origins of Language: A Slim Guide[153]', James R. Hurford traces how humans moved from unspoken gestures and animal cries to shared meanings and spoken trust. The key difference lies not in the sounds made, but in the intentions behind them.

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[152] Corballis, M. C. (2020) 'Mental Travels and the Cognitive Basis of Language', in Arbib, M. A. (ed.).How the Brain Got Language: Towards a New Road Map. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

[153] Hurford, J.R. (2014).The Origins of Language: A Slim Guide. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Human language did not evolve merely to alert or react—it evolved to mean, and to be trusted. Among animals, many signals are automatic. A growl warns, a posture threatens, a call might point out danger. These behaviours are functional but shallow. They do not presume much about what the listener understands or intends. What makes human language different is its reliance on 'intentionality'—both in producing and interpreting meaning. One does not just say something; one says it 'to' someone, 'for' a reason. And the other person must recognise not only the message but the purpose behind it. Hurford makes a critical distinction between 'dyadic' and 'triadic' communication. The former is a basic two-way interaction—something like 'I'm here' or 'Come closer'. Triadic communication, by contrast, introduces a third element: shared attention toward an object or idea. Think of pointing at the sky and saying, 'Look, a plane'. The speaker, listener, and thing all link together in one communicative act. That triangle is a cornerstone of human language. But for such signalling to take hold in a species, something else was needed: 'trust'. Animal communication is often shaped by competition. A monkey's alarm call may help its peers—but it might also mislead them. Among humans, language depends on a delicate balance of honesty and scepticism. If speech were mostly lies, it would fail. If it were only truth, it would be exploited. What evolved, then, is not just language, but a 'social system' capable of tolerating and correcting its own misuse. Hurford also emphasises that early language likely began with shared rituals—small, repeated actions that, over time, became signals. A child reaching up to be picked up may have started as a reflex but quickly turned into a conventional request. These rituals, rooted in physical interaction, gradually turned into abstract gestures, and eventually into spoken words. Language grew not from grammar books, but from lived interactions. Chimps and other primates show glimmers of these skills—especially in competitive settings—but they do not match the human ability to share knowledge cooperatively. Even a simple pointing gesture, which toddlers grasp with ease, tends to confuse chimps. That gap marks the boundary between instinctive reaction and conscious communication. Language is built on layers: action, intention, cooperation, and belief. It works because people believe each other, at least most of the time. Hurford's point is subtle but profound—talk only works when people agree, silently, that words mean something, and that meaning matters.

Origins of meaning

Long before humans ever spoke a word, there was already something in place that we might call meaning—not in language, but in the mind. In 'The Origins of Meaning[154]', James R. Hurford invites us to consider how animals, too, possess internal models of the world that reflect a kind of proto-semantics. Meaning, in this view, emerges not from language itself but from our evolutionary inheritance as creatures capable of recognising, categorising, and responding to their environments in purposeful ways. Hurford begins by distinguishing between two traditional linguistic domains: semantics, the relationship between expressions and the world, and pragmatics, which deals with speakers, listeners, and context. Yet these are later developments. To uncover the true roots of meaning, one must go further back—to a time before words, where meaning was grounded in perception and action. Animals, for example, may not use language, but they form representations of objects and events. A bird remembers where it stored food. A cat crouches before it pounces. These actions reflect internal states that track reality in useful ways. Such pre-linguistic cognition involves what philosophers call 'intentionality': the aboutness of mental states. It allows for beliefs and desires, even in species without speech. Hurford emphasises that these internal states can be true or false, successful, or

[154] Hurford, J.R. (2007). The Origins of Meaning. Oxford University Press.

not, depending on whether they match the external world. This form of meaning—rooted in perception and behaviour—is not yet language, but it is the soil from which language grows. The question of whether animals have concepts remains controversial. Some thinkers argue that language is required for genuine conceptual thought. Others, like Hurford, point to evidence of 'proto concepts' in animal behaviour. For instance, when a primate distinguishes between types of food or recognises individual group members, it reveals a capacity to generalise from experience. These concepts may lack the abstract complexity of human thought, but they are functional and adaptive. Hurford proposes a scale of cognitive complexity. At one end are basic reflexes—automatic, unthinking reactions. At the other are rich human concepts, shaped by introspection and symbolic reasoning. In between lie animal representations: systematic, situation-sensitive, and deeply shaped by evolutionary pressures. These mental models are not linguistic, but they form the cognitive scaffolding that made language possible. Importantly, Hurford does not claim that language simply appeared from nowhere. Instead, he describes a gradual transformation. As hominins evolved, they began to share their internal representations—at first through gestures or vocalisations, and later through structured language. Meaning, once confined to the individual mind, became a tool for cooperation and cultural transmission. In this way, language extended the reach of meaning, making it social, flexible, and cumulative. Meaning came first. Language did not create it; it captured it, shaped it, and finally allowed it to be shared. Before there were words, there were minds. And in those minds, the origins of meaning had already begun to form.

Beyond human nature

In 'Beyond Human Nature: How Culture and Experience Shape the Human Mind[155]' (2012), Jesse J. Prinz highlights the striking diversity of human behaviour and thought, arguing that culture and experience—rather than biology alone—play a central role in shaping the human mind. For decades, many psychologists and linguists assumed that what made humans human was mostly genetic. Traits were said to be 'hardwired' or 'innate'. From moral instincts to gender roles to intelligence, the dominant story was one of evolutionary inheritance. Yet the more researchers studied people outside of elite Western institutions, the more anomalies they found. In some parts of the world, eye contact is a sign of respect; elsewhere, it is rude. Ideas about fairness, beauty, punishment, and even love vary widely—not randomly, but in ways that reflect collective history, ecology, and habit. The mind, it turns out, is shaped not just by genes, but by geography. Cognitive science, once dismissive of cultural differences, is catching up. The view that humans come equipped with a fixed set of mental modules is giving way to a more flexible image. Language, for instance, was long considered an instinct—a universal grammar pre-installed in the brain, waiting to unfold like a flower. But newer research suggests otherwise. Children learn language through pattern recognition, statistical learning, and social interaction. There is no need to posit a built-in grammar; general intelligence, paired with exposure, does the job. The same shift applies to morality. Emotions like guilt and shame do not emerge in a vacuum. They are trained into people through stories, correction, ritual, and repetition. Of course, none of this denies biology's role. People are not blank slates. But what is remarkable is not how little people change, but how much they do. College can raise IQ scores. Musical training can reshape auditory cortex. In short, culture does not just paint on top of biology—it rewires it. And that rewiring happens faster than evolution. Societies shift. Norms evolve. The rise of literacy, the invention of the internet, the transformation of

[155] Prinz, J. J. (2012). Beyond Human Nature: How Culture and Experience Shape the Human Mind. London: Penguin.

economies—these changes have done more to reshape how people think and live than any gene ever could. Culture is humanity's real inheritance. It is messy, adaptive, full of contradiction—but it is ours. This matters for more than just intellectual curiosity. If we believe that traits are fixed by biology, we are more likely to accept inequality as natural, to stigmatise difference, or to treat people as unchangeable. But if behaviour and belief are shaped by culture, then change is not only possible—it is constant. People can be taught, societies can reform, norms can shift. Seeing humanity as shaped by nurture opens a door to moral and political transformation. To go 'beyond human nature', then, is not to deny nature—it is to recognise that what is most natural in people is their capacity to adapt. What makes a human mind is not its resemblance to a machine or a chimpanzee, but its openness to experience, its unfinishedness. Culture is not an overlay on biology—it is the context in which human minds are made. And that may be the most hopeful truth of all.

Language as showing off

Talking is not just about exchanging information—it is about standing out. In everyday conversation, people constantly signal competence, intelligence, and social value. Language, in this view, becomes less about transmitting facts and more about performing relevance. Jean-Louis Dessalles explores this in 'Why We Talk: The Evolutionary Origins of Language[156]' arguing that speech evolved as a subtle but powerful tool for navigating social hierarchies and building alliances. In group life, alliances are everything. Who you trust, who trusts you, and how well you are perceived all impact your survival and influence. Dessalles proposes that language developed as a strategy to win status by appearing useful—especially by providing relevant, biologically significant information. The person who spots danger first, remembers where food is, or offers sharp observations becomes someone others want to keep around. But status comes at a cost. Once someone shows they are consistently valuable, they can demand better treatment from the group. Coalitions have to offer recognition or risk losing that person to a competing group. This give-and-take—between being useful and being rewarded—is what stabilises social hierarchies. Language lets people 'audition' for these roles constantly, using words instead of weapons or displays of strength. Even the most casual remarks carry this undercurrent. Talking about the weather, for instance, is not always about the weather. It is a low-risk way to remain socially visible, to show one is engaged and tuned in. But when the conversation becomes more substantial—when someone shares a sharp insight, a funny observation, or a timely warning—that's when social value is clearly displayed. These moments build prestige, even if unconsciously. Unlike advertising, which relies on volume and repetition, language is constrained by relevance. You cannot just brag endlessly—listeners tune out or push back. In conversation, status is earned only if you follow the unspoken rules: be relevant, make sense, do not lie, and say something worth hearing. The social group acts like a live fact-checker, constantly judging who is valuable and who is just noise. Dessalles goes further, suggesting that this instinct to communicate is not just cultural—it is biological. Humans are wired for conversation in the same way birds are wired for song. The drive to speak, to be heard, to make a point—it is automatic. We do not just want to connect. We want to impress, to prove we are worth aligning with. This instinct shaped the evolution of language. Before humans could structure full arguments or use abstract syntax, they were already using signs and sounds to draw attention and establish credibility. Language became the mirror of our social brain—designed not for neutrality, but for persuasion. In the end, human speech is a kind of constant

[156] Dessalles, J.-L. (2007). Why We Talk: The Evolutionary Origins of Language. Oxford University Press.

campaign. People are not just talking. They are positioning. They are showcasing relevance, hoping to attract allies, admiration, and trust. Language did not evolve to make life easier. It evolved to help people win the ongoing, quiet competition of social life.

Improvising language

In 'The Language Game: How Improvisation Created Language and Changed the World[157]', Morten H. Christiansen and Nick Chater propose a radical rethinking of language. They argue that language did not arise from structured design or fixed rules, but from spontaneous, moment-to-moment improvisation. Like a game of charades, communication is an act of creativity and responsiveness, shaped by the practical demands of context and interaction. Language, they suggest, emerged not through evolutionary hardwiring for grammar, but as a social tool that people gradually refined. Early humans did not invent language all at once. Instead, they made do with what they had—gestures, sounds, facial expressions—until over time, these improvised exchanges stabilised into conventional patterns. Every linguistic system we know today is the product of this long, collaborative evolution. Rather than memorising abstract rules, people learn language by participating. Much like joining a game mid-play, one catches on by observing patterns and trying things out. Children do this effortlessly, not by learning definitions or syntax, but by absorbing patterns through use. This view challenges the long-standing belief that language is based on rigid systems of grammar and meaning. Instead, what feels like structure emerges from repetition, shared understanding, and adaptation. The authors illustrate this with examples like how a word such as 'hammer' can mean different things depending on context—whether requesting a tool, warning of danger, or remembering a past event. This flexibility shows that meaning is shaped less by fixed definitions and more by use within specific situations. Language, then, is not a polished system but a dynamic, ongoing game. Each exchange adds to its complexity, and every speaker helps shape it. It evolves not from perfection but from continuous approximation, from countless human attempts to make themselves understood. By viewing language as a creative improvisation rather than a coded system, Christiansen and Chater offer a refreshing lens on how humans came to speak—and why language remains one of the most remarkable collective inventions of all time.

Music and language

Language and music, at first glance, may seem like distant cousins—one tied to meaning and syntax, the other to feeling and rhythm. But as Uwe Seifert argues in his study from 'Bringing in Emotion: Relating the Evolution of Music-Readiness and Language-Readiness within Comparative Neuroprimatology[158]', the two may share deeper roots than previously assumed. His work builds on the idea that the origins of language cannot be understood without also looking at the emotional and social functions of sound, especially through the lens of rhythm. At the heart of Seifert's work is the proposal that music-readiness (MR) evolved alongside language-readiness (LR), not as its byproduct, but as an equally important route to human communication. His first hypothesis, the Rhythm-First theory, suggests that rhythm came before melody or tonality in evolution. Think of early humans stamping feet, clapping hands, or mimicking natural rhythms before they ever formed sentences. These actions were

[157] Christiansen, M.H. and Chater, N. (2022).The Language Game: How Improvisation Created Language and Changed the World. London: Penguin.

[158] Seifert, U. (2020) 'Bringing in Emotion: Relating the Evolution of Music-Readiness and Language-Readiness within Comparative Neuroprimatology', in Arbib, M.A. (ed.) .How the Brain Got Language: Towards a New Road Map. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

not just noise; they created a kind of pre-linguistic order, a foundation for social rituals and emotional coordination. The second idea Seifert offers is that both music and language emerged from our capacity to imitate and break down patterns. Complex imitation—watching, copying, refining—allowed early humans to segment sounds into reusable units. This made not just speech, but music possible. Shared mechanisms in the brain, particularly those that process timing and sequence, were likely used in both systems. These were not separate evolutionary tracks but overlapping ones, shaped by similar pressures. But perhaps the most human part of this story lies in the third hypothesis: music's ability to bring people together emotionally. Long before language could clearly describe love, anger, or grief, rhythmic sound helped people feel coordinated. Music could calm, excite, or bond individuals in ways words could not. In group settings, synchronised movement—dancing, chanting, drumming—created emotional unity, turning a gathering of individuals into a community. From lullabies to war drums, music did not just express feeling—it created shared feeling. Seifert situates these ideas within the Mirror System Hypothesis, which suggests that our brain's ability to understand and replicate action is central to how both language and music formed. From a neural perspective, regions involved in rhythm and prosody (the melody of speech) are deeply entwined with those that process emotion and social interaction. This is especially true of Broca's area, known for its role in speech production but also active in musical and rhythmic tasks. What emerges is a picture where the evolution of language is not just about symbols and grammar, but about bodies in motion, emotions in sync, and rhythms that bound people together. Seifert's work invites a new perspective: that the roots of human speech lie not just in thinking, but in feeling—and that language was not only born of the brain, but also of the beat.

Communication of music

Music surrounds human life, yet its purpose is often misunderstood. It is not simply an emotional outlet or an aesthetic pleasure. According to Ian Cross in 'Music as a Communicative Medium[159]'(2022), music operates as a crucial communicative medium that evolved alongside language, not as its rival but as its complement. Music thrives in the spaces where language often falters—especially in moments of ambiguity, emotional complexity, or social tension. Language is excellent at delivering precise, propositional content. But sometimes precision can be a problem. In socially delicate moments—during mourning, negotiation, or rituals—the clarity of language can provoke rather than soothe. Music steps in where words fall short. It conveys affect, fosters connection, and allows people to coordinate and communicate without having to agree on specific meanings. One of music's defining traits is its ambiguity. It does not pin down a single message. Instead, it opens a shared emotional space where participants can align their internal states without needing identical thoughts or intentions. This broad interpretive scope enables music to manage relationships and emotions more gently and more inclusively than language can. Music also acts as an 'honest signal'. Its features—rhythm, pitch, dynamics—are tightly linked to bodily states. Faster tempos may suggest excitement or urgency, lower tones may suggest calm or seriousness. These associations mirror animal communication systems, where vocal signals often reveal internal conditions like size or aggression. In humans, music still carries these cues, which are interpreted across cultures despite differences in musical style. But music's meaning is not just biological. It is also deeply cultural. The way people respond to a melody, a rhythm, or a harmony depends on their history,

[159] Cross, I. (2009). Music as a communicative medium. [online] ResearchGate. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237134673_Music_as_a_communicative_medium.

habits, and shared practices. One can hear a lullaby and feel soothed without knowing the language, simply because of how the sounds are organised and the context in which they appear. Music speaks to humans because it resonates in both their bodies and their communities. Importantly, music does not operate in isolation. It relies on uniquely human traits—like shared intentionality, joint attention, and temporal entrainment. These are abilities that allow people to anticipate, respond to, and mirror one another's actions, often without conscious effort. When a group sings or claps together, they are not just performing—they are synchronising minds, bodies, and intentions. This makes music especially suited to social cohesion. It helps people move together, feel together, and belong together. Where language builds structure and order, music builds trust and unity. It is not less complex than language—just complex in different ways. In evolutionary terms, music likely emerged not for entertainment but for survival. It helped early humans navigate the uncertainties of social life, regulate emotions in groups, and reinforce bonds beyond words. Even today, its power lies not in what it says, but in how it brings people into shared feeling and presence.

2. EVOLUTION

2.1. Evolution of speech

(Mechanics of evolution: The tapestry of life's change)

'Evolution has no foresight. It does not plan for the future. It is simply a process of cumulative change'.

— Richard Dawkins, The Blind Watchmaker

'The miracle is not that language evolved, but that it did so without design'.

— Steven Pinker, The Language Instinct

Language evolution

In their article 'Language Evolution as a Darwinian Process: Computational Studies[160]'(2007), Pierre-Yves Oudeyer and Frédéric Kaplan argue that the evolution of language, much like biological evolution, unfolds through processes of replication, variation, and selection. Rather than seeing language as a fixed system or a uniquely human invention outside the rules of nature, they frame it as an adaptive phenomenon shaped by dynamic pressures, trial-and-error, and population interactions. Their approach is computational, simulating how agents—without any preexisting language—gradually develop shared linguistic conventions over time. One of the central insights in their study is that linguistic elements like words or phonemes behave as 'replicators'. These are units that, through imitation, get passed from one mind to another, not unlike how genes are inherited in biology. Just as DNA mutates and adapts to fit changing environments, linguistic replicators evolve to meet cognitive and communicative needs. The process is not perfect; each transmission can introduce

[160] Oudeyer, P.-Y. and Kaplan, F. (2007). Language evolution as a Darwinian process: computational studies. Cognitive Processing, 8(1), pp.21–35. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/s10339-006-0158-3.

small errors or shifts, which, over time, accumulate and generate linguistic diversity. Oudeyer and Kaplan simulate different replication models to see how agents develop consensus. Some agents merely repeat the last word they heard for a particular object; others rely on the most frequently used word. Over time, these subtle differences lead to significant changes in how quickly and efficiently language stabilises. The conclusion is clear: the way information is replicated matters just as much as what is being communicated. The simulations also show that noise—random variations in transmission—can drive language change without any functional purpose, through what is known as 'neutral drift'. These small, functionally meaningless changes can, over generations, alter the structure of a language, mirroring biological evolution where non-beneficial mutations sometimes persist simply by chance. This randomness accounts for why languages diverge and transform even when communication needs remain constant. Crucially, the evolution of language is not only about the external world—it is also about the minds using it. Language must conform to the constraints of cognition. Agents are better at learning and reproducing linguistic forms that are closer to what they already know or can physically produce. For example, agents who babble syllables that resemble human speech naturally converge on sound systems more efficient and learnable than random noise. This adaptation to internal limits is what makes language such a tightly tuned cultural artefact. What Oudeyer and Kaplan ultimately show is that language does not evolve according to a central design or universal blueprint. It evolves locally, socially, and adaptively. Through countless iterations and interactions, linguistic forms emerge that are not only functional but also flexible enough to persist, spread, and transform across generations. This Darwinian perspective does not reduce language to genes or codes—it illuminates how it thrives as a living, evolving system embedded in social minds.

Ecology of language evolution

In 'The Ecology of Language Evolution[161]', Salikoko Mufwene offers a rich, interdisciplinary framework for understanding how languages change, thrive, or die. He draws parallels between language and biological species—not because languages are living organisms, but because they exhibit patterns of variation and adaptation within social and environmental contexts. The key insight of Mufwene's work is that language evolution is best understood through an ecological lens, where both internal structures and external pressures shape linguistic outcomes. Languages do not evolve in isolation; their fates are tied to their speakers, much like a parasite's survival depends on its host. From this perspective, individual speakers—each with their own idiolect—serve as agents of change. As these idiolects interact in a community, certain linguistic features become more common, spreading through usage and social reinforcement. Variation, not uniformity, is the engine of change. Just as in biology, the presence of diversity within a population enables adaptation and innovation. Mufwene emphasises that evolution does not imply progress. A language can become more complex or more simplified, depending on the ecological pressures it faces. These pressures include migration, conquest, economic systems, educational policies, and inter-language contact. In colonised regions, for example, African and indigenous languages were often subordinated to European ones. This unequal power dynamic led to language shift, creolisation, and even language death—not because the colonised languages were less 'fit', but because the social ecology favoured others. From an ethnographic perspective, language ecology refers to the social environment in which language operates—factors like multilingualism, social prestige, and economic opportunity all influence which varieties are preserved or transformed. From a

[161] Mufwene, S. (2001). The Ecology of Language Evolution. Cambridge University Press.

macroecological standpoint, it encompasses broader forces such as population density, institutional support, and geographic dispersion. Both views reveal that linguistic evolution happens not through isolated acts of innovation but through collective adaptations to dynamic surroundings. One of Mufwene's most striking ideas is to treat languages as species rather than organisms. This shift allows for a focus on populations, variation, and competition—key principles in both evolutionary biology and sociolinguistics. Like species, languages speciate: they diversify, split, or merge based on changing conditions. Yet they also hybridise, borrowing features across boundaries when speakers come into contact. This is how new creoles, pidgins, and dialects emerge—not from deliberate invention, but from interaction under pressure. The structural perspective of language ecology explores how different components—sound systems, syntax, morphology—interact. Change in one domain can ripple across the system, just as in ecosystems, where a shift in one species alters the balance for others. Language is not a closed system but a constantly adapting, nonlinear network of signs, shaped both by its internal logic and the external realities of human life. Ultimately, Mufwene's ecological approach reframes language not as a static object of study but as a process: contingent, variable, and deeply embedded in human history.

A Darwinian process

In 'Language Evolution: A Darwinian Process[162]', Bernard H. Bichakjian offers a compelling case for understanding language change through the lens of biological evolution. Unlike the common assumption that language belongs solely to the realm of culture or the mind, Bichakjian argues that linguistic development is grounded in the same evolutionary principles that govern biological traits. He questions the outdated dichotomy between body and mind that has dominated linguistics, emphasising that language, like any human faculty, is shaped by genetic, cognitive, and social pressures acting over time. From this perspective, language does not evolve randomly or through cultural whims alone. Just as physical traits are subject to variation, selection, and adaptation, so too are linguistic features. The article traces the intellectual lineage of this idea, beginning with early 19th-century thinkers like Schlegel and Schleicher. Schleicher, though influenced by Darwin, misunderstood the implications of natural selection by labelling linguistic simplification as a kind of 'decay', failing to see how efficiency might be a selective advantage. Later linguists like Sapir and Jespersen offered glimpses of a more dynamic understanding—suggesting that languages 'drift' or move toward greater communicative clarity—but their insights were largely overshadowed by structuralist models that froze language into static systems. The turn toward Saussurean structuralism redirected the discipline toward the synchronic study of language systems, sidelining evolutionary inquiry. For Bichakjian, this was a detour. He argues that any theory of language must integrate diachronic development and be rooted in the biological capacities of its users. Drawing from the concept of neoteny in evolutionary biology—the preservation of juvenile traits into adulthood—he suggests that human language evolved by favouring traits acquired earlier in development, such as simplified morphology or more fixed syntax. These traits offer cognitive advantages and are easier to learn and use, giving them an edge in the evolutionary process. Using the Indo-European language family as a case study, Bichakjian outlines how over millennia, complex inflectional systems gave way to simpler, more transparent grammatical constructions. These shifts did not reflect loss or decay but adaptation: systems streamlined for learning and social communication. The rise of auxiliary verbs, fixed word order, and analytic

[162] Bichakjian, B.H. (2007) 'Language Evolution: A Darwinian Process', Theoria et Historia Scientiarum, 11(1): 25–45.

structures over synthetic ones are all signs of this selective pressure in action. Crucially, Bichakjian acknowledges that external forces like language contact or social upheaval also influence linguistic change. However, these do not undermine the evolutionary model. Much like hybridisation in biology, cultural interference introduces variation, but the underlying selective processes still determine which features persist. Ultimately, Bichakjian's view reframes language not as a cultural anomaly but as a biological and cognitive tool shaped by evolutionary pressures. Language evolves not to be perfect or pure, but to be used—efficiently, flexibly, and communicatively—by human beings across time and place.

Evolution, adaptation, and change

In his book 'Language Evolution, Acquisition, Adaptation, and Change[163]', Luke Strongman explores the complex and intertwined processes that shape language over time, framing it as both a biological and cultural phenomenon. Languages today number between 6000 and 8000, but many are on the verge of extinction, while a few dominant ones expand across continents. Strongman emphasises that language does not remain static—it constantly evolves, shifts, and adapts to the sociocultural and cognitive environments of its speakers. This evolution, he argues, mirrors the dynamics of living systems, where adaptation, competition, and environmental pressures shape survival and form. Human language, he writes, likely emerged from a mix of gestures, vocalisations, and perhaps even song, gradually coalescing into structured systems over the last 200,000 years. The debate between innate structures and learnt behaviour remains central, but most researchers now agree that three adaptive systems underlie language: biological evolution, individual learning, and cultural transmission. Strongman points out that language is not simply passed down genetically but also through dynamic social interactions—what a person learns and how they use language depends on the society they are part of, and how that society values and uses different linguistic forms. Universal Grammar, proposed by Noam Chomsky, suggests that humans are born with an innate capacity for language. Strongman considers this theory, noting that our ability to learn language so effortlessly, even with limited exposure, indicates deep biological roots. But this capacity does not function in isolation; it is constantly shaped by communication contexts, cognitive development, and even technological evolution. For instance, media forms—from oral storytelling to digital platforms—have influenced not only how language is transmitted but also how it is structured and perceived socially. Strongman draws on the distinction between the broader faculty of language shared with animals and the narrower faculty unique to humans—our recursive, conceptual, and intentional use of language. This recursion allows humans to embed ideas within ideas, a feature central to abstract thought and complex communication. Through this lens, language is not only about words but about the cognitive machinery behind them—how humans create, interpret, and manipulate meanings in increasingly subtle and layered ways. Language change, according to Strongman, is not just slow evolution—it can happen rapidly under certain conditions. Migration, shifting prestige, or media exposure can alter the way people speak within a generation. These shifts often reflect the adaptation of speakers to new environments—social, technological, or even emotional. Whether through dialects, new words, or altered syntax, language responds to the needs, constraints, and desires of its users. Ultimately, Strongman presents language as a living system—complex, responsive, and deeply human. Its evolution is driven not by a single force,

[163] Strongman, L. (2012) 'Language Evolution, Acquisition, Adaptation, and Change', in Language Evolution, Acquisition, Adaptation, and Change, Chapter 2. Inter-Disciplinary Press.

but by the continuous interaction between our biology, our minds, and the social worlds we inhabit.

Evolution of communication

In 'The Evolution of Communication[164]', Marc D. Hauser explores how communication systems have evolved across species and why they take the specific forms they do. The central argument is that communication, though seemingly diverse in form—from birdsong to human speech—emerges from shared biological, environmental, and social pressures. Whether it is a flower signalling bees with colour or a lion coordinating with its pride during a hunt, all forms of communication are designed to solve adaptive problems. Their efficiency depends not just on what is conveyed, but on how the message is shaped by the cognitive and physiological limitations of both sender and receiver. Hauser approaches the evolution of communication through a comparative and evolutionary lens, drawing on the ethological framework proposed by Nikolaas Tinbergen. Tinbergen's four questions—concerning mechanism, development, function, and evolutionary history—serve as the book's foundation. This framework is crucial, Hauser argues, because it prevents any single perspective—be it linguistic, psychological, or biological—from dominating the conversation. Instead, it encourages a more integrated view that connects neurological mechanisms with ecological functions and phylogenetic roots. One key concept Hauser emphasises is that communication systems are not just passive reflections of cognitive capacity or environmental needs. They are shaped by interaction and design. Just as a traffic light is constrained by the limits of its technology and the expectations of its users, communication systems evolve to balance expressiveness with clarity, cost with efficiency. For example, the claws of marine shrimp signal territorial defence, but their effectiveness depends not only on the display's energy cost but also on the visual sensitivity of their rivals. The system works only if both sides are calibrated to the same channel of meaning. Hauser also highlights the importance of distinguishing between cues, signals, and signs. Cues are incidental features that convey information but aren't evolved for that purpose—like the size of an animal indicating strength. Signals, by contrast, are intentional and evolved for communication, such as a bird's mating call. Signs, like a trail of footprints, provide useful information without intent. Understanding this difference is essential to interpreting the evolutionary significance of behaviour. Through comparative studies across species—especially birds, amphibians, and primates—Hauser shows how signals evolve under pressures like predation, mating, and social cooperation. While birdsong and human language may seem unrelated, both depend on similar constraints of memory, perception, and learning. However, human language presents a special case. Though we understand its neurological and developmental basis well, we still lack a full account of its evolutionary function and origin. Hauser urges researchers to look beyond syntax and examine how language may have evolved in response to specific social and ecological challenges. 'The Evolution of Communication' invites readers to see language not as a singular leap in evolution, but as part of a broader continuum of communication across life forms.

Evolution of imagination

Language did not begin as a technical tool for labelling things in the world—it emerged from something deeper, older, and more embodied: the human imagination. Stephen Asma, in 'The Evolution of Imagination[165]', argues that before grammar or vocabulary, early humans were already crafting meaning through rhythmic gestures, emotional vocalisations, and social

[164] Hauser, M. D. (1996) The Evolution of Communication, MIT Press.
[165] Asma, S. (2017) The Evolution of Imagination, University of Chicago Press.

improvisation. These proto-narratives, rooted in ritual and play, provided the scaffolding for language to evolve not as cold transmission, but as a creative act. Improvisation was central to this transformation. Much like a jazz musician riffing over a melodic 'head', early humans spun spontaneous variations on familiar emotional themes. In this analogy, the 'head' is the melody—structured, repeatable, memorable—while improvisation adds novelty and personal resonance. The same duality exists in language: fixed words and syntax form the skeleton, but improvisation breathes life into meaning. Asma shows how even infants, through play and imitation, rehearse social scenarios long before they speak. These rehearsals, or simulations, formed a primitive kind of knowledge—one rooted in pattern, rhythm, and feeling. What makes imagination evolutionary is its capacity to simulate and sequence events internally. This simulation system enabled early humans to anticipate danger, test behaviours mentally, and rehearse group rituals. It operated in two modes: involuntary (dreams, mimicry, spontaneous gestures) and voluntary (deliberate planning, storytelling, symbolic invention). Language emerged from the fusion of these modes, not replacing imagination, but organising and amplifying it. Asma cautions against if early humans lacked complex cognition. The imaginative lives of Pleistocene humans may have been vivid, chaotic, even overwhelming—long before language formalised mental experience. With the rise of symbolic culture, imagination became self-directing. One could now create signs, store them, reflect on them, and even use them to simulate oneself. This shift made possible not just communication, but storytelling. Narrative, in this context, is not ornament—it is survival. Stories help communities navigate fear, bond emotionally, and transmit adaptive knowledge. Monsters in myth mirror real-world threats; gods encode morality. Fiction reveals emotional truth, even when it distorts factual reality. The strength of language lies not only in what it describes but in what it evokes. Meaning becomes real through resonance. Asma's view reframes language as a system for instructing imagination. A well-told story is not just heard—it is lived internally, felt in the body. The improvising imagination, rooted in both 'hot' (emotional, spontaneous) and 'cold' (deliberate, strategic) cognition, becomes the central force behind language evolution. In this way, imagination does not serve language—language serves imagination. And it is through improvisation that humans became not just speakers, but meaning-makers, myth-builders, and co-authors of reality.

Cultural evolution

In 'The Emotional Mind: The Affective Roots of Culture and Cognition[166]', Stephen T. Asma and Rami Gabriel argue that human culture is not shaped solely by reason or utility but is fundamentally driven by emotional systems inherited from our evolutionary past. These affective systems—such as care, fear, pride, shame, and awe—form the underlying architecture for behaviours that structure societies, from gift-giving and cooperation to ritual, morality, and spirituality. Unlike standard models of cultural evolution that rely on rational decision-making or genetic fitness, Asma and Gabriel suggest that cultural norms develop from emotional regulation. Rituals, for example, are not just symbolic acts but tools for affect management. They help individuals navigate powerful emotions and facilitate social coordination, especially in larger groups. Emotional responses like trust and respect drive gift-giving practices and reciprocity, reinforcing bonds within families and broader kin networks. As societies expand, these systems are extended and abstracted into ideologies, contracts, and institutions, but their emotional roots remain intact. The authors highlight how hierarchy and dominance, central to

[166] Asma, S.T. and Gabriel, R. (2019). The Emotional Mind: The Affective Roots of Culture and Cognition. Harvard University Press.

social organisation, also emerge from affective dynamics. In early human groups, like the !Kung, leadership was situational and consensual, based on trust and emotional reputation rather than coercive power. As populations grew, dominance hierarchies became more formalised, supported by ceremonial displays and social rituals. Emotions such as honour, envy, and pride played a central role in stabilising these hierarchies. Observers within the group would monitor and internalise emotional signals, gradually cementing social roles through repeated affective interactions. Cooperation, another key to social evolution, is likewise rooted in affect rather than calculation. People reciprocate favours not merely for future gain, but because emotions like gratitude and guilt create a powerful inner compulsion to respond. These mechanisms of moral sentiment—first observed by Darwin—develop into shared social norms and ethical systems. Even behaviours that seem to contradict individual self-interest, such as punishing unfairness in economic games, are guided by emotional reactions to perceived injustice. The book also explores the affective roots of religion and art. Emotions like awe, wonder, and transcendence are central to spiritual experience. Through ritual, myth, and artistic expression, societies channel these emotions into communal forms of meaning. Cave paintings, shamanic practices, and sacred ceremonies all reflect an attempt to communicate emotionally intense experiences. These affective practices are not decorative; they are central to how societies organise belief, pass down knowledge, and reinforce cohesion. Ultimately, Asma and Gabriel propose that the evolution of culture is best understood as the domestication and elaboration of emotional systems. Human social life, in all its complexity, remains grounded in the primal emotional circuits that shaped the earliest forms of bonding, conflict, and communication.

Language adapts to the brain

In their chapter 'A Solution to the Logical Problem of Language Evolution: Language as an Adaptation to the Human Brain[167]', Nick Chater and Morten H. Christiansen offer a bold reversal of the traditional view that human brains are biologically hardwired for language. Against the dominant Chomskyan model of a genetically specified universal grammar (UG), they argue that it is not the brain that evolved to accommodate language, but language that evolved to fit the cognitive capacities of the brain. Rather than being a natural organ with genetically programmed rules, language is seen as a cultural construct that survives by conforming to human learning and processing constraints. The so-called 'logical problem of language evolution' arises from the idea that language—as described by UG—comprises intricate and arbitrary rules that must have emerged through natural selection. But language changes faster than genes can follow, and populations around the world speak vastly different languages. It seems implausible that natural selection could hardwire all the potential diversity into human DNA. This suggests that UG, as a biologically inherited system, is not evolutionarily viable. Instead of assuming the existence of a pre-built language organ, Chater and Christiansen propose that language behaves like other cultural phenomena—constantly evolving through use. As languages are transmitted from generation to generation, only the forms that align with general cognitive constraints survive. These include memory limitations, preferences for certain word orders, and tendencies toward regularity. Over time, languages adapt to be easier to learn, process, and use within communities. This explains why certain structural patterns appear universally—not because they are innate, but because they are the

[167] Chater, N. and Christiansen, M. H. (2011). A Solution to the Logical Problem of Language Evolution: Language as an Adaptation to the Human Brain. In M. Tallerman & K. R. Gibson (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution. Oxford University Press.

most cognitively efficient. The authors emphasise that language structure is shaped by learning mechanisms already present in the brain—like the ability to process sequences, detect patterns, and assign meaning to sounds. Just as musical structures reflect the physiology of hearing and motor control, and tools mirror the constraints of the human hand, languages reflect the design of the mind. Cognitive biases shape how language sounds, how it is built, and how it changes. Compositional structures, pragmatic efficiency, and memory constraints all guide the emergence of grammatical systems without the need for genetic coding. This theory also avoids the difficulties of gene–language co-evolution. Since linguistic environments shift rapidly, there is no stable target for genetic adaptation. Human children can learn any language, not just those of their ancestors, suggesting that brains are not specifically tailored for individual languages but equipped with general learning abilities. In this view, language is not a biological miracle, nor the product of an arbitrary genetic leap. It is a cultural artefact that has evolved in step with cognition, shaped by the minds that use it. Language acquisition is not biological unfolding, but cumulative learning shaped by communication and the constraints of thought. It is not the mind that bends to language, but language that molds itself to the mind.

Wired for culture

In 'Wired for Culture: Origins of the Human Social Mind[168]', Mark Pagel argues that culture, rather than individual biological traits, is the defining feature of human success. The book outlines how, around 80,000 years ago, Homo sapiens took an evolutionary leap by embracing culture—not as high art or literature, but as the transmission of survival strategies through imitation, belief systems, and cooperation. This development was not gradual but sudden in evolutionary terms, marking a pivotal shift from genetic to cultural inheritance. For millions of years, our ancestors lived in small kin-based groups, relying on instinct and physical adaptation to survive. But with the emergence of symbolic communication, tool-sharing, and group rituals, humans began organising their lives around shared information rather than just inherited behaviour. This meant knowledge could travel from one mind to another, skipping the long generational delays of genetic change. The result was the emergence of tribes, languages, customs, and technologies that could adapt faster than any genome. Culture, Pagel argues, functions like a 'survival vehicle', allowing humans to occupy vastly different ecological niches—from the Arctic to tropical rainforests—without needing distinct biological adaptations. Just as birds develop different beak shapes to exploit different foods, human cultures evolve specialised knowledge systems to survive in their environments. And crucially, this adaptation happens through imitation, not mutation. Children absorb the habits, beliefs, and language of their groups effortlessly, creating continuity that bypasses biology. However, this cultural strategy comes with a cost: deep group loyalty. Because survival depends on being accepted by the tribe, culture wires individuals for intense in-group identification. People adopt the beliefs, norms, and prejudices of their community with near-automatic devotion. This helps cooperation, but also makes humans vulnerable to manipulation, groupthink, and intergroup conflict. Culture does not merely shape what people do—it forms what they believe is right, moral, and natural. The result is a species wired not for independent reason, but for loyalty to inherited traditions. From language to morality, Pagel shows that many things humans think of as 'rational' or 'personal' are products of cultural programming. Whether one values freedom, family honour, religious duty, or self-expression depends less on personal reasoning and more on the culture one grows up in. In this sense, culture becomes both a ladder to civilisation and a trap of tribalism. Pagel's insight reframes evolution as a two-tiered process: genetic change

[168]Pagel, M. (2012). Wired for Culture: Origins of the Human Social Mind. Allen Lane.

shaped our biology, but cultural evolution shaped our minds. And because culture spreads and changes faster than genes, it now plays the dominant role in shaping human destiny. The price of this adaptive flexibility, however, is ideological rigidity: humans may kill or sacrifice themselves not for genes, but for the stories and symbols their cultures have taught them to believe in. In the end, culture is what made humans powerful—but it also made them dangerous. It gave language, morality, art, and science, but also war, dogma, and inequality. To understand what it means to be human, Pagel insists, one must understand culture not as a decoration of life, but as its engine.

2.2. Rise and fall of language

(Rationality's arc: From logic to emotion)

'In an age of information, ignorance is a choice'.

— Donny Miller

'Public opinion, shaped by emotion rather than evidence, can become a force hostile to truth'.

— Hannah Arendt, Truth and Politics

Progress or Decay?

Language never stands still. As Jean Aitchison emphasises in 'Language Change: Progress or Decay?[169]', speech is subject to the same restless motion that shapes the physical and social world. From Heraclitus to Yeats, thinkers have echoed the truth that change governs all things. Language, embedded in this flow, evolves—sometimes subtly, sometimes drastically—alongside the humans who use it. The English of Chaucer is no longer ours, just as today's idioms will soon sound foreign. Aitchison opens with poetic reminders: Heraclitus's River of flux, Spenser's whirling wheel, and von Humboldt's insistence that language is a 'ceaseless flaming thought'. Even the simplest fourteenth-century verse, intended for 'symple men that strange Inglis cannot ken', now requires footnotes. As Chaucer noted, a thousand years renders familiar words odd and strange. Why would language alone escape the movement that transforms tadpoles into frogs or milk into cheese? Yet despite its inevitability, language change stirs resistance. Commentators often lament the loss of older forms, branding modern usage lazy or corrupt. From complaints about the death of the subjunctive to ridicule of phrases like 'between you and I', critics cast each deviation as decline. Aitchison counters that such views typically confuse personal preference with linguistic decay. Slang and variation may offend taste, but they follow patterns, and speakers unconsciously apply consistent rules even when breaking so-called norms. The heart of the debate lies in whether change is random or directed. Language, like fashion, shifts with time, but not without structure. Changes in pronunciation, grammar, and meaning tend to follow recurring paths—lenition of consonants, reanalysis of syntax, semantic drift. These processes may not aim toward improvement, but neither are they evidence of degeneration. What emerges is different, not worse. 'Language Change: Progress or Decay?' also explores one of the most fundamental engines of linguistic evolution: grammaticalisation. This process turns once-independent words into grammatical tools—particles, affixes, and eventually vanishing traces that structure speech more efficiently. John Horne Tooke famously called such changes the 'wheels of language', arguing that abbreviation enables thought to race ahead, carried by a more agile tongue. Over time, full words are emptied

[169] Aitchison, J. (2013) Language Change: Progress or Decay?, Routledge.

of meaning and bound into syntax, not as detritus, but as essential scaffolding. Grammaticalisation moves in layers. New forms arise while older ones persist, like geological strata that resist erasure. These changes follow patterns. Even word order can crystallise, as free arrangements yield to fixed sequences once grammatical markers fuse tightly to verbs. Idioms offer a glimpse into the endpoint of this process. These petrified phrases began as metaphors or casual collocations and were gradually absorbed into the grammar. Once independent, they now function as indivisible units of meaning. Grammaticalisation also blurs boundaries between syntax and discourse. They no longer describe, but shape conversation itself. As words shrink, fuse, and lose transparency, they become more efficient carriers of thought. This process may seem like decay—meaning disappearing, structures fossilising—but it is also a renewal. It is how language adapts to its own use, compressing expression to keep up with cognition. Grammaticalisation thus embodies the paradox of linguistic change: the more a word loses, the more the system gains. Aitchison concludes that language change, like biological evolution, is neither good nor bad. It is natural, persistent, and shaped by social, cognitive, and cultural pressures. Rather than fight this motion, one must understand its mechanisms. Progress or decay becomes a question of perspective, not of fact.

Development and Breakdown of Language

The idea that children, by learning imperfectly, push language forward—or backward—has fascinated scholars for over a century. At the same time, some have looked at speech disorders, slips of the tongue, or the effects of alcohol to understand whether language decay mimics its growth. In 'Language Change' Jean Aitchison urges caution. Neither child speech nor disordered communication offers a simple key to understanding how language changes. Instead, these phenomena offer clues—limited and scattered—about deeper patterns rooted in society and communication itself. Children are undeniably innovators. As early as the nineteenth century, linguists suggested that each new generation mishears and reinvents the language it inherits. This view gained traction again in the 1960s and ’70s, when researchers proposed that language evolves precisely because children subtly reinterpret what they hear. But later research complicated this picture. Eric Lenneberg’s 'critical period' hypothesis proposed a strict window in which humans can naturally acquire language, implying that only young learners reshape grammar. Yet studies of late learners, stroke survivors, and second-language acquisition showed a far more flexible model. Language learning slows with age, but it does not halt—and most speakers, not just children, bend rules in everyday use. Take irregular verbs: children famously say comed and goed, echoing historical shifts that regularised past tense forms. But young speakers also do things not seen in real language change. For instance, they might drop tense markers entirely ('He melt' instead of 'He melted'), a simplification rarely seen beyond the nursery. Even features like double negatives emerge from mixing adult patterns, not from creating new syntax. Child speech does echo some natural phonetic processes—like simplifying consonant clusters (saying bup instead of bump). But again, this reflects articulatory immaturity more than a driver of change. In fact, most phonetic shifts among adults—such as vowel chain shifts—go in the opposite direction of childhood errors. Adult change stems from fluent, efficient use, not developmental limits. Beyond the cradle, speech also shifts across the lifespan. Very young children mimic nearby accents. School-age kids adopt their peers’ slang. Teenagers often resist parental speech, carving out group identity through language. These trends—known as 'age-grading'—do shape certain vocabulary and pronunciation choices, but most fall away in adulthood. The truly lasting changes often happen through peer networks, not from toddlers’ babbling. Could disordered or altered speech provide better insight? Slips of the tongue, drunken speech, and aphasia have all been studied. Slips are

mostly accidental blends or transpositions—'wipser' instead of 'whisper', for instance. These rarely stick, unless picked up by influential figures or media. Drunken speech, too, reveals some relevant patterns: final stops tend to get devoiced, and articulation slows. But many features—like exaggerated consonant length—do not match historical change. Aphasia, meanwhile, offers even less guidance. Word-finding difficulties, telegraphic syntax, or prosody loss in brain-injured patients reflect neurological damage, not natural speech drift. They disrupt language, but do not redirect it. Ultimately, both children's mistakes and adult breakdowns expose where language is vulnerable—but they are not the main engines of its transformation. Language shifts when groups of speakers adjust to each other, seek new identities, or respond to new pressures. Children and pathology highlight flexibility; society drives evolution.

Deception, consciousness, and truth

In 'Wired for Culture: Origins of the Human Social Mind', Mark Pagel challenges the common assumption that human intelligence evolved primarily to perceive truth. Instead, he argues that our minds evolved to ensure survival and social success, even at the expense of accuracy. Truth, in this context, is secondary to persuasion, cohesion, and manipulation. As Robert Trivers observed, if deception is key to communication, then evolution must have also selected for self-deception—masking one's motives even from oneself to more convincingly manipulate others. This turns the classical view of rational cognition on its head: the human mind might not be an instrument of truth but an adaptive tool for survival through social navigation. Cognitive science supports this view by showing how memory and perception are deeply unreliable. People routinely fabricate or distort memories, often unconsciously, to protect their ego or preserve a coherent narrative. Recollections are less about objective truth and more about storytelling for identity maintenance. What one person remembers about a shared event may diverge radically from others' accounts. This is not mere error—it reflects an evolved strategy to manage social relationships and inner consistency. Pagel extends this argument by comparing the internal 'I' to a narrator created by genes for their own benefit. The 'self' may be less an agent than a useful illusion, shaped by conflicting genetic interests—maternal and paternal alleles vying subtly within our psychology. Our experience of volition, even morality, may be downstream of unconscious processes. In studies of decision-making, brain activity often precedes conscious awareness by several seconds, suggesting that decisions are made before we know we are making them. Consciousness may simply be the reporting mechanism, not the initiator. Deception, both of others and of oneself, plays a critical role in this mental architecture. Social life demands cooperation, but too much honesty can be costly, while skilful dishonesty can be advantageous. Yet, widespread deception would destroy trust. This creates a tension between the need to deceive and the parallel need to detect deception—a cognitive arms race that likely drove much of our intelligence. Cases like that of Peter Bryan, who deceived professionals into believing he was stable before committing a horrific crime, illustrate how finely tuned this capacity can be. Our minds have evolved not only to read others but to conceal our own dangerous or strategic truths. But deception is only half the story. Imitation—social learning—is the other side. In dynamic environments, copying successful others often beats figuring things out from scratch. Alan Rogers and Kevin Laland showed that copying can outperform innovation, provided there are a few innovators to lead. Yet, this strategy is vulnerable when errors are copied too. Social learning makes knowledge cumulative but fragile. Pagel's work suggests that what feels like rational autonomy may instead be a system evolved for copying, concealing, and guessing. Consciousness, morality, and even identity emerge from a mind evolved not for truth but for strategic survival.

The rise and fall of rationality

In their compelling study 'The Rise and Fall of Rationality in Language[170]', Marten Scheffer, Ingrid van de Leemput, Els Weinans, and Johan Bollen explore how public language has transformed over the past 170 years, revealing a profound shift in the way people communicate and, by extension, think. Their research, based on an analysis of millions of digitised books, charts a trajectory from collective, logic-centred discourse toward a more personal, emotionally driven style of expression. Beginning around 1850, the study finds a steady rise in the frequency of words associated with rational thought—terms like 'conclusion', 'determine', and 'evidence'. At the same time, words rooted in personal feeling and belief—'feel', 'believe', 'hope'—gradually declined. This trend continued until about 1980, when the pattern reversed. Since then, particularly after the rise of social media around 2007, emotion-laden language has surged while fact-based vocabulary has waned. The shift is not confined to literature alone. Similar patterns are found in nonfiction, news articles from *The New York Times*, and even Google search behaviour. The authors identify two opposing language poles: one tied to society—rationality, institutions, science—and the other to the personal—intuition, emotion, spirituality. These align with psychological models of human cognition that distinguish between fast, instinctive thinking and slower, deliberative reasoning. Their analysis suggests that language has become increasingly aligned with the former. To illustrate this change, the authors performed principal component analysis on the 5,000 most frequent English and Spanish words. One component revealed a clear 'tilted hockey stick' pattern: rational terms gradually increasing until 1980, then plummeting as emotional terms surged. The data also show a shift from plural to singular pronouns, reflecting a move from collective identity to individualism. Across fiction and nonfiction, and in multiple languages, the pattern holds. Possible explanations for this reversal range from disillusionment with postwar economic promises to the amplification of emotional content through digital media. The authors suggest that neoliberal economic shifts may have undermined trust in expert-driven, rational discourse, opening the door for more subjective and expressive language. Social media, with its emphasis on immediacy and engagement, likely intensified this effect, favouring language that provokes emotional reaction. Still, the authors are cautious. They acknowledge that corpus biases—such as editorial policies or changing literary trends—may influence the data. Yet the consistency of the pattern across independent sources strengthens the case for a genuine transformation in public discourse. This linguistic shift raises urgent questions. Is the decline in rational language merely stylistic, or does it reflect deeper changes in how people think and engage with the world? If language shapes thought, the rise of emotionally charged, individualistic vocabulary may indicate a broader cultural turn away from shared reasoning and toward fragmented, intuitive worldviews. Scheffer and colleagues conclude that societies may now face a choice: allow the drift to continue or strive for a renewed balance—honouring the insights of intuition while reclaiming the grounding force of rational discourse.

Exploitation of social instincts

In 'Wired for Culture: Origins of the Human Social Mind' (2012) Mark Pagel explores how human societies, much like termite colonies, are shaped by scale-free rules that enable complex organisation without centralised control. The comparison may seem unsettling at first. Termites live in tight, impersonal structures, blindly following local rules to build vast mounds. Humans, too, often live in dense cities, cooperating with strangers, guided more by trust in

[170] Scheffer, M., van de Leemput, I., Weinans, E. and Bollen, J. (2021) The Rise and Fall of Rationality in Language. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

systems than in personal knowledge. We like to believe our behaviours are governed by rational thought, but Pagel suggests otherwise—human societies function on deep evolutionary instincts exploited by cultural systems that evolved far faster than our genes could catch up. This raises a fundamental dilemma. For most of human history, people lived in small bands, never exceeding a few hundred individuals. Evolution shaped us for those intimate settings. Yet today, billions live in sprawling, hierarchical societies. How did this leap happen? The answer lies in the exploitation of basic social instincts—trust, imitation, and reputation. These instincts, once useful in tribal life, now fuel vast bureaucracies, marketplaces, and governments. We follow local rules and trust abstract systems not because we are naturally suited to them, but because culture has repurposed our tribal habits. Scale-free mechanisms—language, reputation, social learning—allow societies to grow without inventing entirely new systems. Like termites dropping pellets by instinct, people contribute to society by following small, predictable scripts: standing in lines, paying taxes, using currency. Out of this emerges self-organised complexity. Air travel, for example, is not coordinated by a single mind; rather, each participant—passenger, pilot, clerk—follows local rules, resulting in global mobility. These instincts can also be manipulated. Leaders often concentrate power by exploiting trust and signalling authority through wealth or symbolic rituals. As Pagel notes, the display of power—buildings, uniforms, pageantry—is not mere decoration but a tool to signal strength and stability. These signals reassure people that the system will endure, even if it means surrendering autonomy. Yet, humans do not just obey—they cluster. Even in large societies, people remain rooted in small groups. This 'social viscosity' preserves trust through familiar connections. Stanley Milgram's small-world experiment revealed that even in vast populations, people are only a few steps apart. These invisible webs sustain cooperation. They also protect societies from disintegration, though authoritarian regimes often attempt to sever them, using surveillance and fear to prevent collective action. As societies become more diverse, however, shared trust erodes. People increasingly rely on visible cues—language, ethnicity, dress—to determine allegiance. This can fuel division but also reveals the fragility of social cohesion. Pagel argues that our ability to cooperate beyond kin is the true foundation of civilisation. If that falters, the termite mound begins to crack.

The politics of language

In 'Of the Origin and Progress of Language[171]', James Burnett, Lord Monboddo argues that language could not have arisen from human nature alone, nor did it emerge in isolation. It was the result of collective life, of people coming together out of necessity, and only within such early societies could speech have developed. Like agriculture or law, language was a human invention—complex, cumulative, and deeply dependent on the conditions of communal living. To speak meaningfully, Monboddo insists, one must have someone to speak to. A solitary man in the forest, however intelligent or articulate, has no reason to create signs for ideas. Language presupposes society. Before one examines the first sounds or utterances, it is necessary to ask: What brought humans together in the first place? Drawing on Aristotle, Monboddo observes that humans are not purely solitary or purely social. Like boars, horses, or beavers—who vary between individual and group behaviour depending on time and environment—humans are flexible. We are capable of solitude but also inclined, under pressure, to live cooperatively. But this gregariousness, he claims, is not automatic. It arises

[171] Burnett, J. (1774). Of the Origin and Progress of Language.

under threat: from predators, hunger, or scarcity. People began to form bands to share resources, defend themselves, and organise labour. From these early associations, political society emerged—not through instinct, but through invention and adaptation. Language, he argues, is a byproduct of this development. The need to name, warn, divide tasks, and resolve disputes led to signs and then to speech. The more complex society became, the more articulate its language had to be. And with language came the refinement of custom, memory, and law. But neither society nor speech existed at the beginning—they emerged together, and each sustained the other. To reinforce his point, Monboddo turns to historical and natural evidence. Ancient and modern accounts alike describe people living in brutish conditions: naked, without shelter, tools, or structured communication. He points to the South Seas and American frontiers as evidence that humans can live without cities or languages—but only at the edge of survival. Where life becomes more complex—where people build, plan, and share—they inevitably create speech. He also considers the orangutan, then thought to be a kind of wild man. Though these animals use simple tools and show signs of intelligence, they remain solitary and voiceless. They do not form communities or invent shared symbols. Their case illustrates a boundary: mechanical skill alone does not produce society, and without society, speech cannot develop. Civil society, Monboddo concludes, is not natural in the strictest sense. It is not given but made. And speech, far from being a divine gift or biological reflex, was born within this human artifice. It is not enough to breathe or cry out—true language requires intention, reflection, and shared life. It is a political achievement as much as a linguistic one.

Language is not natural to man

Lord Monboddo presents a careful argument against the idea that language is an innate, natural faculty of the human species. Rather than emerging spontaneously like breathing or digestion, language, he claims, is a social invention—developed, refined, and passed on through imitation, memory, and instruction. Monboddo begins by asking a basic but often overlooked question: if language were truly natural, wouldn't it arise universally in the same form across all human groups? Nature, after all, grants her gifts with consistency. Birds of one species sing alike; dogs understand one another's signals without being taught. But when it comes to human speech, no such uniformity exists. Each tribe, each people, speaks a different language. And these languages are not variations on one original code—they differ in sound, grammar, and meaning so completely that they must be learnt anew. If humans were born with a natural language, it would have to be one language, universally understood and spoken without instruction. Yet no such language has ever been found. The diversity of tongues, Monboddo argues, is itself proof that language is not instinctual. Unlike blinking or breathing, speech must be taught. No child begins to speak in complete, meaningful sentences without hearing others first. In fact, without exposure to speech, children do not develop it on their own—something borne out by reports of feral or isolated individuals. These cases support his claim that language is not a built-in function but a learnt art, acquired only through social living. Moreover, there is no evidence of innate phonemes or syntax common to all human languages. Philologists and grammarians have failed to isolate a shared core set of natural sounds or grammatical rules that would serve as the basis for a universal tongue. Even the most basic structures—word order, tense, gender, number—vary widely across cultures. If speech were natural, one would expect at least some consistency. Monboddo also notes that many early or so-called 'savage' societies survive and reproduce without complex verbal language. They use gestures, cries, and signals to convey essential information. If articulate speech were as necessary to human life as digestion or reproduction, then surely it would appear in all societies, regardless of cultural development. But this is not the case. People have thrived with the most minimal vocal systems, proving that

speech is a refinement, not a necessity granted at birth. Thus, Monboddo concludes, language cannot be natural in the strict sense. It is an art, created by humans to serve the needs of social life. Like agriculture, music, or tool-making, it emerged through observation, imitation, and necessity. Its development marks a turning point in human evolution, but it did not begin in nature—it began in culture.

Dying words

In 'Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us[172]', linguist Nicholas Evans explores a sobering yet revelatory truth: languages are disappearing at an alarming rate, and with them, entire systems of knowledge, identity, and worldview are vanishing. The book is not merely a lament for lost words—it is a call to attention. Each language, Evans argues, is not just a means of communication but a unique lens on reality, forged over generations by people living landscapes, solving problems, and telling particular stories. The decline of linguistic diversity is often framed as a natural byproduct of globalisation. One might believe that the spread of English or Mandarin makes communication more efficient. But Evans shows that this convenience comes at a steep cost. As languages die—often unnoticed, one speaker at a time—we lose not just vocabulary but irreplaceable ways of seeing and naming the world. Languages capture fine distinctions that dominant tongues may overlook. In some Aboriginal Australian languages, verbs distinguish between the specific ways different marsupials move; in others, verbs for 'give' shift depending on the shape or texture of the object. Such differences are not ornamental—they are deeply tied to culture, ecology, and survival. Evans uses the metaphor of a 'Library of Babel' to express this crisis. Just as Borges imagined a library with every possible book, language diversity represents a library of human thought. But now, huge sections of this library are crumbling. Oral traditions go unrecorded. Grammar structures vanish. Names for local plants, rituals, and cosmologies disappear without a trace. As with biological extinction, the danger is not just the loss of one specimen, but the unravelling of a web of interconnections. The book's strength lies in its insistence that language loss is not inevitable. It results from political, economic, and cultural choices—pressures that marginalise local languages in favour of national or global ones. Mass media, urban migration, and standardised education accelerate the decline. Yet, Evans also documents communities resisting this trend, revitalising their languages through storytelling, song, and education. Language is deeply embedded in the fabric of thought itself. Evans reminds us that grammar is not just a set of rules but a reflection of a people's perception of time, agency, gender, hierarchy, and the natural world. To lose a language is to lose a cosmos. If we hope to preserve the full story of human possibility, we must learn to listen before the silence sets in.

How language trains thought

Language does more than help people express what they already know—it shapes what can be known. Thought, far from existing outside words, is guided by the paths each language opens. Nicholas Evans, in 'Dying Words', explores how different languages form distinct habits of attention, memory, and perception, effectively training the minds of their speakers to think in particular ways. Language is not simply a reflection of thought; it is a trellis along which thought grows. The way a language categorises the world influences how its speakers understand that world. In English, nouns are divided into countable and uncountable—'two

[172] Evans, N. (2010) Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us. Chichester Wiley-Blackwell.

apples' versus 'some water'. But in languages like Yucatec Maya or Japanese, such distinctions are not grammatically necessary; instead, classifiers serve to specify types and quantities. This changes how speakers naturally think about objects and substances. Experiments with children show this effect in action: when taught a novel word like dax, English-speaking children tend to associate it with shape (object-like properties), while Japanese-speaking children emphasise material (substance-like properties). Spatial orientation is another domain shaped by language. Speakers of Guugu Yimithirr, for example, use cardinal directions—north, south, east, west—rather than relative ones like 'left' and 'right'. This linguistic habit requires constant awareness of geographical direction, to the point where even young children in these communities develop exceptional navigational skills. Language, in this case, orients not only speech but the body and perception itself. Time, too, can be carved differently by grammar. The Aymara language of the Andes conceives of the past as being in front—visible and known—and the future behind, as hidden and unknowable. This metaphorical inversion, deeply embedded in the language, appears not just in words but also in gestures, as speakers point forward when referring to yesterday. Such habits demonstrate that grammar is not simply a tool for organising meaning but a framework that arranges thought itself. Evans shows that these effects begin remarkably early. Korean toddlers, for instance, attend more to whether objects fit snugly or loosely—a difference expressed in Korean verbs like 'kkita'—than English-speaking children of the same age, who instead focus on 'in' or 'on'. Language creates attention grooves in the developing brain, reinforcing distinctions that matter within a given culture. This shaping power of language is especially evident in cases where categories do not overlap between tongues. A language like Arammba, with its base-six counting system, leads its speakers to grasp powers of six naturally. Or consider the Kunwinjku word 'kakkak', which combines multiple kinship roles in a single concept foreign to English. These are not merely linguistic oddities but clues to alternative cognitive architectures. While people are all born with the same neurological potential, the language one speaks gradually channels that potential into culturally specific patterns. Each language frames reality differently, offering its speakers a unique stance toward the world. As Evans argues, endangered languages are not just vanishing codes but collapsing trellises—each holding up a distinct way of thinking, remembering, and imagining.

The origins of grammar

In their chapter 'Grammaticalisation Theory as a Tool for Reconstructing Language Evolution[173]' in 'The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution', Bernd Heine and Tania Kuteva offer a compelling framework for tracing the deep history of language. Where traditional historical linguistics reaches its limits—typically a few millennia—grammaticalisation theory steps in, allowing inferences about earlier stages of human communication. The key to this approach is recognising that certain types of linguistic change follow universal and unidirectional pathways. Lexical items gradually become grammatical, and grammatical items in turn evolve into even more abstract structures. This regularity makes it possible to reverse-engineer the likely features of earlier languages. The process of grammaticalisation begins when a word with a clear, concrete meaning—such as a noun for a body part or an object—begins to take on a grammatical function. Over time, such a word might lose its original meaning and become a marker of tense, aspect, or definiteness. For example, the Latin demonstrative 'ille' ('that') gradually transformed into the French article 'le' ('the'), and the Latin

[173] Heine, B. and Kuteva, T. (2011). "Grammaticalization Theory as a Tool for Reconstructing Language Evolution." In M. Tallerman and K. R. Gibson (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution. Oxford University Press.

numeral 'unus' ('one') became 'un' ('a'). These transformations are not random but follow a cognitive logic. Humans use what is familiar and perceptible to express abstract, relational, or contextual meanings. That process never reverses—articles do not turn back into demonstratives, for instance. This unidirectionality provides a map of language evolution: if a form exists today as an article, one can infer that it likely began as a demonstrative or numeral. This methodology rests on several principles: languages always change, speakers are inventive, linguistic forms are repurposed for new functions, context matters, and change tends to follow a directional path. Using these principles, one can reconstruct plausible stages in the emergence of grammatical systems. If modern languages contain definite and indefinite articles derived from demonstratives and numerals, then it is likely that earlier languages lacked articles altogether. What seems intuitive today—articles as a basic component of grammar—was once entirely absent. To visualise this historical development, Heine and Kuteva propose a layering model that organises grammatical evolution into six stages. Initially, languages consist only of nouns or noun-like forms. Then verbs emerge, enabling simple sentence formation. With subsequent layers, adjectives, adverbs, and more sophisticated phrase structures develop. Eventually, the system incorporates subordination and the abstract complexities of modern grammar. Each layer builds on the last, reflecting not only the growth of linguistic structures but also a progression in cognitive abstraction. Importantly, this model does not imply that all modern languages reach the same endpoint. Languages like Mandarin Chinese appear to lack much overt morphosyntax, yet still exhibit grammaticalisation processes, particularly in how they express aspect. Chinese does not have a past tense marker like English's '-ed', but it uses adverbs and particles to convey similar meanings. This supports the idea that even when surface structures differ, the underlying pathways of evolution remain consistent. Thus, grammaticalisation theory does more than trace how language changes—it provides a method for inferring how grammar came to be. Rather than assuming grammatical categories emerged fully formed, the theory reveals a slow accretion of structure through everyday use, interaction, and cognitive adaptation. Words that once named things became tools for expressing time, space, modality, and eventually the full range of human thought. The authors argue that grammar did not appear suddenly but emerged layer by layer through refunctionalisation of pre-existing elements. This view presents grammar not as an arbitrary invention but as a response to the communicative and cognitive pressures of human life. Through grammaticalisation, the ordinary becomes symbolic, and in doing so, language becomes the flexible, open-ended system it is today.

2.3. Moral progress

(From Instincts to Ideals: Charting moral advancement)

'Of moral purpose I see not a trace in nature. That is an article of exclusively human manufacture'.

— Thomas Henry Huxley, Evolution and Ethics

'Morality has no other demonstrable ultimate function'.

— E. O. Wilson, On Human Nature

Language, man, and society

In 'Language, Man and Society', James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, presents a strikingly original and deeply philosophical account of language's emergence, arguing that speech is

neither an instinct nor a biological given but a product of social invention and reflective intelligence. Monboddo's work, situated in the intellectual world of the Scottish Enlightenment, draws on classical traditions and speculative anthropology to explore the question not just of how language developed, but what it reveals about human nature itself. For Monboddo, language is the most astonishing of human arts—more intricate than any craft, and more central to human life than even agriculture or metallurgy. Yet, unlike the instinctual cries of animals or the fixed calls of birds, language is not spontaneous. It does not arise fully formed from nature, nor does it appear in any one universal form among all peoples. Every human tongue must be learnt, taught, passed from speaker to speaker, and gradually refined. This alone, he argues, refutes the claim that speech is a natural faculty. Speech, Monboddo insists, presupposes society. Humans did not begin speaking while alone in the wilderness, nor could a solitary figure have invented it. The very need for communication arises only within collective life—for shared labour, mutual defence, or the transmission of thought. Thus, society gave birth to speech, not the other way around. And like all human arts, it developed in stages: from gestures and cries to imitative sounds, then to articulate speech and, eventually, the poetic and rhetorical flourishes of mature language. His view draws from and extends the insights of other Enlightenment thinkers, including Rousseau and Condillac, but Monboddo is distinctive in rooting his theory in both comparative natural history and ancient philosophy. He often refers to the orangutan—not to equate it with humanity, but to mark the limits of imitation and the absence of communal invention. Though some apes may mimic tools or gestures, they never speak, organise, or develop culture. For him, this absence of shared language and political society marks the boundary between human and animal. Language is not simply sound—it is the expression of general ideas. And general ideas, too, are not innate. They emerge from experience and reflection: sensation leads to memory, memory to abstraction, abstraction to comparison, and comparison to universals. In this ascending process, one sees how language depends on thought and thought on social and sensory experience. Thus, even the formal content of language—its ideas, not just its words—is acquired, shaped, and cultivated over time. Monboddo laments that modern science, enamoured with mechanical explanations, has neglected this fundamental truth: that man is, above all, a social and rational animal whose most powerful tool—language—is the fruit of centuries of cooperative life. He sees in ancient Greek the highest refinement of this art and calls for a return to the classical ideal—not to mimic the past, but to restore depth and dignity to our discourse. Though much of Monboddo's theory may now seem speculative, his insight that language is a social invention, not a biological reflex, remains profoundly relevant. In an age where the boundaries between machine code and human speech blur, and where cultural transmission faces fragmentation, his call to recover the roots of language in shared human endeavour has gained renewed urgency.

The idea of moral progress

In 'The Idea of Moral Progress[174]', Michele M. Moody-Adams argues that moral progress is not only real but achievable, though always within specific cultural or historical contexts rather than by moving toward a fixed ethical endpoint. Her thesis holds that moral progress unfolds locally—within practices, institutions, or domains of belief—by refining existing moral concepts rather than inventing entirely new ones. Such progress occurs not through discovering unknown moral universals, but through deepening the understanding of ideas people already

[174] Moody-Adams, M.M. (1999). The Idea of Moral Progress. Metaphilosophy, 30(3), pp.168–185. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9973.00120.

grasp intuitively, like justice, equality, or dignity. Rather than imagining moral progress as a linear ascent toward a predefined utopia, Moody-Adams presents it as a kind of ethical thickening: one sees more clearly what a concept like justice entails, and one's emotional and social imagination becomes better attuned to its practical demands. For example, historical movements for abolition or women's rights did not invent new categories of right and wrong but called attention to contradictions in prevailing norms—making visible, through protest or critique, what had always been morally salient. This process reveals what she calls the 'semantic depth' of moral ideas: their full range and implications unfold only when they are tested against new human experiences. A key insight of Moody-Adams's work is that progressive moral change requires not only intellectual clarity but also the capacity to integrate new interpretations into existing belief systems. People act on moral beliefs not in isolation but through patterns of emotions, habits, and social roles. Thus, successful moral insight depends on its ability to 'fit' the web of attitudes and emotions already in place. Philosophers like Bentham, Kant, and Rawls, though often seen as introducing grand theories, largely sought to articulate commitments embedded in common moral reasoning. Even Peter Singer's appeal to aid distant strangers rests on ordinary notions of compassion and fairness extended by degree, not category. Moody-Adams also stresses that the dissemination of moral insight is not primarily a philosophical task. Change is often driven by activists and social critics who provoke public conscience—sometimes by exposing hypocrisy, other times by offering compelling personal examples. Civil rights leaders, feminist thinkers, and other reformers have historically played this role, not by creating new moral languages, but by urging society to live up to what it already claims to believe. Their task is to disturb the comfort of partial or shallow moral understandings, not to replace them wholesale. The real enemy of moral progress, Moody-Adams contends, is not a lack of moral imagination but a refusal to examine familiar norms. Most societies possess the tools for critique, but they often suppress their use. When people act as if they do not know what they, at some level, already suspect to be wrong, progress stalls. Conversely, institutional changes motivated by self-interest or pragmatism can sometimes foster genuine insight, showing how belief and behaviour can evolve together. The morally engaged life embraces criticism, reflection, and moral dialogue as essential to human dignity. While moral progress may be uneven and never final, its possibility rests in the constant effort to understand better what people already sense to be true.

Moral evolution

Moral progress and the evolution of morality represent two distinct yet intertwined trajectories in human development—one tracing cultural shifts in ethical understanding, the other uncovering the biological roots of moral behaviour. While moral progress refers to deliberate improvements in values, laws, and institutions, moral evolution considers how moral instincts may have emerged as adaptive traits in our ancestors. Together, they offer a fuller view of how humanity's ethical landscape has formed and continues to change. The growing richness understanding of moral concepts suggests that true progress involves not only better laws, but deeper insight into justice itself. Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell's 'The Evolution of Moral Progress[175] ' offers a naturalistic theory of moral development that challenges the view that evolved human psychology imposes fixed limits on inclusivity. Building on recent work in philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences, it argues that moral progress is possible when

[175] Buchanan, A. and Powell, R. (2018). The Evolution of Moral Progress. Oxford University Press.

stable, secure social conditions allow for the expansion of inclusive values. Their biocultural theory highlights how human moral responses are shaped by both innate psychological traits and external circumstances. Under threat, humans revert to exclusivist, parochial morality; under safety, they are capable of broader moral concern and sustained moral progress. Moral progress describes as changes in institutions and practices that lead societies toward more just and desirable conditions. Yet progress need not be the result of moral conviction alone. External forces—such as legal mandates or economic incentives—can push individuals and groups toward better behaviour even when comprehension lags. Still, many significant shifts, like those brought by abolition or civil rights movements, emerge from within: social movements that challenge norms and redefine ethical possibilities. The typology of moral progress includes improved moral motivation, expanded concern for others, and more refined ethical reasoning. One telling indicator is the widening of the 'moral circle'—a phrase used to describe humanity's growing recognition of moral standing in groups once excluded. The inclusion of non-human animals in ethical considerations as a contemporary marker of progress, grounded in an awareness of sentience rather than species alone. Such shifts point not only to institutional reform but to a transformation in how people perceive moral status itself. The evolution of morality, by contrast, explores the deep biological underpinnings of such sentiments. Among social animals—from insects to mammals—altruistic behaviour emerges when cooperation serves survival. Sterile ants that sacrifice reproduction for colony welfare, or chimpanzees that share food and comfort distressed peers, show that social cohesion can precede abstract moral reasoning. If primates possessed 'premoral' sentiments—empathy, reciprocity, even a sense of fairness—that can be the scaffolding upon which human morality is later built. As early human societies expanded from small bands into complex states, these biological inclinations had to be stabilised through more formal systems—rules, reputational norms, and eventually religion. Supernatural beliefs reinforced cooperation by introducing ever-present, moral observers. Whether ancestral spirits or divine judges, such figures extended the reach of social monitoring and encouraged restraint even in solitude. Yet evolution offers no simple ascent. Some theorists argue that partially altruistic individuals may have been punished more severely than consistent egoists, creating an 'adaptive valley' that made the evolution of moral awareness difficult. Others highlight the paradox of punishment itself: if only the aware are punished, awareness may become maladaptive. These puzzles underscore the complexity of aligning self-interest with moral insight. Still, the cognitive tools that support moral behaviour—such as theory of mind and emotional responses like disgust—point to a deep interplay between social intelligence and ethical norms. Neurological evidence shows that moral violations activate areas associated with primal emotions, suggesting that reason alone does not govern moral judgment. In short, moral progress and moral evolution reflect two lenses on the same arc: one shaped by social struggle and conceptual refinement, the other by ancient instincts moulded for cooperation. Ethical improvement does not emerge solely from reasoned ideals or biological necessity, but from the tension between both. Moral awareness, once anchored in survival, now strives for justice.

Moral progress

In 'Moral Progress: An Introduction[176]', Albert W. Musschenga and Gerben Meynen lay the foundation for a broader discussion about whether, how, and in what sense human societies improve morally over time. The text sets out to clarify a problem both philosophical and practical: what does it mean to say the world is morally better now than it was a century ago—

[176] Musschenga, A. W. and Meynen, G. (2017) Moral Progress: An Introduction.

and how might one intentionally move it further in that direction? The authors begin by emphasising that not all change qualifies as progress. Just as a patient regaining weight might not be recovering health, or a house's accidental improvement may not reflect the vision of an architect, a shift in social practice only counts as moral progress if it leads to a better outcome and is meaningfully connected to what preceded it. Random improvements do not establish a trajectory. Moral progress implies more than isolated advances—it requires an intelligible, causally linked sequence of changes in beliefs, practices, or institutions that reflect a moral deepening. This insistence on causality is central. Without a sense of continuity, improvement becomes indistinguishable from coincidence. The process of progress, Musschenga and Meynen argue, must be traceable: people or institutions must do something to effect change, and the change must respond to moral concerns. A society may become more inclusive, less violent, or more rights-conscious, but unless those changes are driven by some recognition of what is right, they do not count as moral achievements in the full sense. Another crucial aspect is the difficulty of defining the standard by which 'better' is judged. Without agreement on what counts as moral good—justice, equality, freedom, compassion—it becomes nearly impossible to assess progress. Yet, the authors do not demand a universal moral framework. Instead, they advocate for practical strategies that can be applied within specific cultural or institutional contexts, guided by shared understandings of ethical improvement, even if global consensus remains elusive. The broader project, then, is threefold: first, to clarify what is meant by moral progress conceptually; second, to develop reliable ways to measure such progress empirically; and third, to apply this understanding in shaping policies, institutions, and actions. This practical dimension is vital. Without tools for implementation, even the most robust ethical theory risks becoming idle reflection. By linking theory with real-world application, the volume aims to help communities recognise where moral progress has occurred and how to foster it further. Musschenga and Meynen argue that thinking seriously about moral progress demands more than optimism or idealism—it requires conceptual rigor, empirical grounding, and a commitment to deliberate action.

Emotional construction of morals

In 'The Emotional Construction of Morals[177]', Jesse J. Prinz explores the possibility of moral progress without relying on absolute standards. His approach blends relativism with emotional constructivism, arguing that morality arises from cultural and emotional responses rather than objective truths. This poses an immediate challenge: if moral systems are historically and culturally contingent, how can we speak of improvement at all? Can one moral order be better than another without appealing to some fixed ethical framework? Prinz begins by distinguishing between two kinds of nihilism. The first, often linked to thinkers like Mackie, denies the reality of moral facts altogether—arguing that all moral claims are fundamentally false. The second, softer version allows for moral truth but denies the possibility of ranking one moral system above another. If morality is merely an expression of local norms and sentiments, then changes from one system to the next might be seen as lateral shifts rather than upward progress. Yet Prinz resists this conclusion. He contends that even within a relativistic framework, moral progress is possible—but only from within. There is no god's-eye view from which to measure better and worse moralities. Rather, change happens like a ship rebuilt at sea: while floating in one moral system, people repair it piece by piece by identifying inconsistencies, resolving contradictions, and responding to practical demands. Progress, in this view, means greater internal coherence, broader applicability, and alignment with values such

[177] Prinz, J.J., 2007. The Emotional Construction of Morals. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

as welfare, stability, and inclusiveness. This incremental process uses existing norms as tools for self-correction. When a community promotes kindness yet ignores distant suffering, the inconsistency invites revision. Such reform might not overthrow the old framework but deepen it—extending the principle of compassion across borders. Importantly, Prinz includes non-moral standards—such as practicality, effectiveness, and emotional resonance—as part of the evaluative toolkit for judging moral improvement. However, this method does not guarantee benevolence. Prinz warns of 'coherent evil'—systems like Nazism that may be internally consistent but fail on broader human criteria like compassion, universality, or wellbeing. True progress, he argues, must satisfy a diverse range of standards, not merely fit a logical structure. Prinz also examines the traps that can hinder or distort moral evolution. These include romanticising contemporary values while misjudging the past, employing unjust means for allegedly moral ends, and mistaking control or obedience for virtue. He highlights the risk of corruption in institutions and the dangers of treating morality as fixed. Moral rigidity, he suggests, is the enemy of progress. Rather than aligning with Kantian duty, utilitarian calculus, or Aristotelian virtue as absolute foundations, Prinz sees these frameworks as instruments among many. Human morality spans multiple domains—fairness, loyalty, purity—and no single principle can account for them all. A pluralistic model better fits the complexity of moral life. Importantly, morality must not be discarded. Though its foundations are emotional and constructed, it performs essential social functions: regulating behaviour, guiding cooperation, and generating accountability. Without moral sentiments like guilt or compassion, societies would unravel. Prinz proposes a vision of moral progress grounded in emotional realism and cultural reflection—a project that affirms moral change as both possible and necessary, even in the absence of universal truths.

Louder than words

Understanding language is not just about words and grammar—it is about what happens in the mind when people make sense of them. In 'Louder Than Words[178]', Benjamin Bergen explores how meaning is not a static definition stored in the brain, but a living, dynamic experience recreated through the body and its systems. When people read or hear words, their minds simulate what those words describe, drawing on sensory, motor, and emotional systems to generate meaning. This idea—called embodied simulation—challenges centuries of thinking. For a long time, language was seen as abstract and logic-based, disconnected from physical experience. The classical view assumed that meaning could be stored in the form of mental definitions, like dictionary entries in the brain. But Bergen, drawing on decades of cognitive science research, argues that this is not how meaning really works. Take a simple story about a polar bear sneaking across snow. Readers might mentally see the scene and imagine the cold, the texture of snow, or even the act of hiding a black nose with a paw—details that are not stated but are essential to the story. This ability to fill in missing parts is not due to logic or definitions, but simulation. The brain, when understanding the sentence, re-creates the experience using visual and motor areas, almost as if the person were there. What makes this process remarkable is its unconscious precision. People rarely notice that they are doing it, yet it happens all the time. A sentence like 'The driver gripped the wheel and honked the horn' creates different mental experiences depending on whether the sentence uses 'you' or 'he'. One triggers a first-person simulation, the other a third-person one. The brain adapts, switching perspective effortlessly. Grammar plays a crucial role in shaping these simulations. It does not

[178] Bergen, B. K. (2012) Louder Than Words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning. New York: Basic Books.

just link words—it tells who did what to whom, what role each element plays, and whether the event is ongoing or complete. In this way, grammar helps build the scene in the mind, acting not as a rigid rulebook but as the scaffolding for imagination. Bergen also shows how small grammatical changes affect mental focus. A verb in the progressive aspect ('was running') prompts readers to imagine the action unfolding. The perfect aspect ('had run') draws attention to its completion. These changes might seem trivial, but they shift how one mentally constructs reality. Meaning is not found in dictionaries or even in the words themselves. It lives in the brain, shaped by experience, guided by grammar, and embodied through perception and action. The mind does not just interpret language—it performs it.

Meaning in your grasp

'Louder Than Words' explores one of the great mysteries of language: how people understand not just concrete descriptions like 'the bear ran across the ice', but also abstract ideas such as freedom, responsibility, or society. The central theory Bergen presents—embodied simulation—suggests that people make sense of words by mentally re-enacting experiences through perception, action, and emotion. When a word like 'grasp' is used metaphorically—as in 'grasp an idea'—the brain does not just decode a symbol. Instead, it may subtly activate the physical experience of grasping, linking abstract understanding to concrete action. This idea becomes more intriguing when it moves beyond physical descriptions. How can simulation explain our grasp of abstract concepts? Bergen shows that much of abstract language borrows from the physical world. People say they have 'swallowed' an idea, 'carried the weight' of a decision, or 'fallen into despair'. These are not just figures of speech—they hint at how humans might understand such concepts. Even ideas like society or time are often expressed using concrete metaphors. A society can have 'cracks', be 'closed', or 'fall apart'. Time 'flies', 'drags', or 'passes'. These metaphors do not just colour language; they help structure thought. Supporting this theory, experiments show that people process metaphorical expressions more efficiently after physically performing the corresponding actions. Someone who just mimed grasping, for example, may understand the phrase 'grasp an idea' more quickly. Brain imaging adds further weight. Regions involved in motor control often activate when people process metaphorical verbs like 'kick the habit' or 'shoulder the blame'. These findings suggest the mind uses the body as a framework to understand not just the physical world, but also symbolic meaning. Yet this connection is not always consistent. Familiar phrases like 'bite the bullet' may activate these systems less strongly—perhaps because repeated use weakens the vividness of the metaphor. Still, novel or emotionally charged metaphors seem to prompt more robust simulations, pointing to a deeper connection between freshness in language and the brain’s response. Bergen also explores fictive motion—phrases like 'the road runs along the coast', where nothing literally moves. Readers still imagine motion, suggesting the brain prefers dynamic representations even for static situations. This preference for action helps build rich, flexible models of meaning. Bergen argues that even when people speak about ideas they cannot touch or see, their understanding remains grounded in physical experience. The brain does not just store meanings like entries in a dictionary. It performs them—running simulations that make meaning feel vivid, lived, and real.

Repurposed mind

When Benjamin Bergen opens 'Louder Than Words' with a vivid scene of a polar bear hunting seals, he does more than set the tone—he provides a demonstration of how meaning is constructed through embodied simulation. Even if the detail about a bear covering its nose is apocryphal, the story draws readers into an experience they can imagine. The crunch of snow,

the slow crawl of a predator, the anticipation of a pounce—all come to life, not because they are seen, but because the mind reenacts them. This kind of mental reenactment lies at the heart of Bergen's argument. Language does not just pass information from speaker to listener in neat, encoded packets. Instead, words evoke simulations—sensory, motor, emotional experiences—that help listeners or readers reconstruct meaning in their own minds. The traditional view of language as an abstract symbolic system, detached from bodily experience, fails to account for how deeply perceptual and motor systems are involved when people process even the simplest phrases. Understanding is not just decoding; it is doing—mentally. But what happens when language leaves the physical world behind? When people talk about concepts like justice or society or time, there is nothing to see or hear or touch. Here, too, Bergen shows that people reach for the concrete. Abstract ideas are almost always expressed through physical metaphors: time flows, arguments are attacked, and society has cracks that people can fall through. These are not just figures of speech. They are cognitive strategies. Language borrows from bodily experience to make sense of what cannot be directly sensed. This ability to simulate is not limited to language. It is a product of evolution's thrift. Rather than inventing new systems for complex reasoning, human brains repurposed older systems built for perception and action. The brain did not evolve a special 'language organ'—it tweaked and adapted what was already there. This recycling is why the motor cortex lights up when someone hears a sentence like 'grasp the idea'. It is also why math, music, and even moral reasoning draw on spatial and bodily metaphors. In this light, communication becomes a much more fragile process. It is not the perfect exchange of ideas, as classical models suggested. Instead, it is a dance of approximations. A speaker tries to evoke a world in the listener's mind, and if their simulations align closely enough, understanding happens. Meaning is not transmitted like data—it is recreated in motion, shaped by memory, context, and culture. The miracle of language is not its precision but its adaptability: it works, not because it is flawless, but because it is flexible enough to let people meet in the middle.

Noise matters

Communication, whether in animals or humans, is always imperfect. R. Haven Wiley's 'Noise Matters: The Evolution of Communication[179]' argues that noise is not merely an obstacle to overcome but a fundamental component of communication itself. It shapes how signals are sent, received, and interpreted, influencing both behaviour and evolution. This insight, grounded in decades of empirical research, challenges the ideal of perfect transmission and suggests that all acts of communication are shaped by an unavoidable friction between message and reception. Noise enters communication through the environment, physiology, and perception. Animals and humans alike must filter signals from a background filled with irrelevant stimuli. Wiley shows that contrast—how clearly a signal stands out from its surroundings—is essential. Birds sing at dawn, not just for poetic reasons, but because the world is quieter then. Rainforest species, overwhelmed by insect drone, shift their frequencies downward to be heard. Communication systems thus adapt to the noise of their environments, not only in pitch or timing but in signal structure itself. Repetition and predictability enhance detectability, not because complexity is favoured, but because noise demands redundancy. Wiley frames these adaptations as the result of a coevolution between signallers and receivers. Signals are not static—they are shaped by the responses of their audience, and the audience in turn develops sensory tools tuned to the kinds of signals worth responding to. But this mutual tuning cannot eliminate errors. Even in well-adapted systems, signallers must exaggerate,

[179] Wiley, R.H. (2015) Noise Matters: The Evolution of Communication. Harvard University Press.

repeat, or ritualise their signals to cut through the static. A songbird does not sing once; it repeats a recognisable pattern, shaped not for elegance but for persistence against interference. These behaviours, often interpreted as expressive, are in fact tactical. Errors are not only inevitable—they are structured. The types of mistakes a receiver makes define how communication evolves. Wiley notes that signal detection requires balancing two conflicting types of errors: false positives and false negatives. The receiver must judge whether a signal is real or noise, familiar or alien, honest or deceptive. No system can optimise for both at once, so communication develops around trade-offs. These trade-offs, in turn, give rise to categorisation: signals are sorted into familiar types, just as people are socially categorised as friend, rival, or stranger. In social species, especially humans, this becomes foundational. Recognition is not a bonus feature but a necessity. Knowing who is speaking—and what group they belong to—affects every subsequent decision. Noise complicates this process. It ensures that signals are always partly ambiguous, and therefore that recognition always carries the possibility of error. These errors shape not only relationships but also the evolution of social strategies, from cooperation to competition. Communication, then, is not simply about information transfer. It is an evolved system of behaviours designed to minimise the inevitable distortions of noise. Wiley argues that even honesty, often seen as a communicative ideal, is a statistical tendency rather than a rule. Deception exists not as a breakdown but as a possibility structured by noise. The same conditions that allow clear understanding also allow manipulation. In this view, science, language, and even thought is vulnerable. If perception is shaped by noisy inputs and responses are tuned to probabilistic outcomes, then understanding itself is a kind of noise-conditioned behaviour. The mind, like the animal receiver, reaches not for certainty but for best guesses under constraint. As Wiley concludes, noise is not just a background feature—it is the condition of communication, and therefore the condition of knowledge itself.

Emotional mind

In 'The Emotional Mind: The Affective Roots of Culture and Cognition[180]', Stephen T. Asma and Rami Gabriel present a compelling alternative to the dominant paradigms in psychology and philosophy of mind. Moving beyond the computational and behavioural models that have long shaped the field, they argue that affective systems—emotions, moods, and drives—form the biological core of human cognition. Unlike symbolic processors or neural modules that operate in disembodied abstraction, emotions are deeply rooted in evolutionary history and shape not only perception and motivation but also culture, language, and social organisation. The authors begin by revisiting Darwin's early insights into emotional expression in animals and humans, an area sidelined by behaviourism and later by cognitive science's obsession with information-processing models. In contrast to these paradigms, Asma and Gabriel advocate for a view grounded in affective neuroscience—a field that, thanks to researchers like Jaak Panksepp and Antonio Damasio, has demonstrated that primary emotional systems are not the byproducts of cognition but its very substrate. These emotional circuits, such as fear, care, play, and rage, evolved long before the neocortex and continue to influence higher-order thinking. In this sense, consciousness is not an emergent rational faculty but a layered process, with ancient affective systems feeding into more recent symbolic and linguistic ones. Language, under this view, emerges not as a pure naming system but as a tool for managing social emotions—an extension of grooming behaviours into the auditory and imaginative realms. The book highlights that emotions are not irrational residues to be

[180] Asma, S.T. and Gabriel, R. (2019). The Emotional Mind: The Affective Roots of Culture and Cognition. Harvard University Press.

overcome by reason, but organising principles of mental life. The authors explain how affective systems serve as somatic markers, guiding attention, assigning significance, and prioritising behaviour. Concepts, far from being neutral mental files, are affectively loaded, formed through patterns of experience and association, not detached propositions. Meaning itself is shown to be an embodied phenomenon, shaped by ecological feedback and emotional resonance. Asma and Gabriel criticise the long-standing tendency in philosophy to treat emotions as propositional attitudes. Instead, they advocate a model of affective intentionality, where emotions are not judgments about the world but directional forces embedded in an organism's practical engagements. Drawing from evolutionary psychology, developmental neuroscience, and cultural anthropology, they present emotions as the bridge between biology and culture. Language and imagination, for instance, are viewed as affectively charged systems. Linguist Daniel Dor's idea of language as an 'imagination-instructing system' is invoked to show how speech cues listeners to construct internal scenes shaped by both memory and emotion. In this sense, language decouples thought from immediate perception while remaining anchored in affective motivations. 'The Emotional Mind' offers a biologically and culturally integrated framework for understanding how emotions give rise to cognition, meaning, and social order.

Cooperation and religion

In 'The Emotional Mind: The Affective Roots of Culture and Cognition', Stephen T. Asma questions whether the so-called 'Holocene cooperation problem' is as novel or puzzling as often claimed. The idea that larger, anonymous societies faced a new challenge of maintaining cooperation without close kinship ties overlooks the emotional capacities that humans had long before the rise of states. The CARE system, which evolved in the Pleistocene, already allowed humans to extend empathy and altruism beyond immediate family. Cultural practices like shared rituals and ornamentation further amplified this capacity, fostering cooperation among non-kin. Rather than inventing moral systems from scratch during the Holocene, humans were building on preexisting emotional infrastructures that had long supported social cohesion. Asma also challenges the idea that modern humans live in truly anonymous societies. Even in cities, people function within small-scale networks—neighbourhoods, religious groups, families. These affiliations, not abstract citizenship, are the true sources of moral behaviour and cooperation. The supposed transition from tribal ethics to stranger ethics may be overstated. Altruism is still largely grounded in local, emotionally meaningful relationships. Another critique Asma offers concerns the common paradoxes attributed to religion: that it involves high costs and centres around unverifiable claims. But these so-called paradoxes dissolve when viewed through the lens of affect. Religion provides real, tangible benefits. In many parts of the world, temples and churches are not just places of worship but also hubs for social services, education, charity, and community bonding. In under-resourced societies, religious institutions often function as lifelines. Religion also encourages prosocial behaviour; religious adherents consistently give more to both religious and secular causes than non-believers. Furthermore, religion was never a rational menu of beliefs picked for utility. It was—and remains—a lived experience, enmeshed in daily life. Animistic beliefs, for example, are not illogical remnants of primitive thought. They are adaptive ways of managing uncertainty and anxiety in environments where natural forces remain unpredictable. Offering gifts to local spirits in Southeast Asia or seeking blessings for a home are emotionally coherent actions. They restore agency in a world that otherwise feels uncontrollable. Asma emphasises that religion helps humans regulate powerful emotions. Rituals serve to calm, reorient, and strengthen individuals facing stress, grief, or fear. These practices, far from being irrational, are emotionally efficient. They function like psychological tools, managing internal states when external control is

impossible. Religious morality also reshaped values. Virtues like humility and compassion replaced older ideals of pride and aggression, adapting emotional dispositions to new social realities. Religion, in this light, is not an intellectual error. It is an emotional technology—an evolved cultural system built to manage fear, foster trust, and maintain cohesion in ever-growing human societies.

3. THEORIES

Gregory Bateson

(Systems, signals, and the sacred: Gregory Bateson's legacy of thought)

'The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think'.

— Gregory Bateson, An Ecology of Mind

Double Bind

Gregory Bateson's work invites a shift in how people understand knowledge, language, and communication. In 'Gregory Bateson: Epistemology, Language, Play, and the Double Bind[181]', Edmond Wright unpacks how Bateson's ideas offer not only a theory of systems also a radical way to think about meaning, perception, and the fragility of understanding in a complex world. At the heart of Bateson's epistemology is his metaphor of 'binocular vision'. Just as two eyes provide slightly different angles to generate a sense of depth, two perspectives on an idea—held in tension—allow a more layered view of reality. Knowledge does not emerge from a single, linear stream but from a pattern of differences. This relational view challenges rigid, monologic systems that try to fix truth in closed definitions. Instead, learning happens through difference, through contrast, and through the dynamic interplay of perspectives. This leads to Bateson's critique of 'tautological systems'—those that function in closed loops, incapable of adaptation. Such systems only reinforce themselves, blind to novelty, unable to respond meaningfully to a changing environment. Evolution, in contrast, depends on unpredictability, error, and flexibility. Bateson links this to a distinction drawn from Jung between the 'pleroma' (the world of undifferentiated matter) and the 'creatura' (the world of living systems that interpret and respond). Humans belong to the latter: their survival depends not just on reacting but on interpreting—on learning how to learn. Language, for Bateson, is both a tool and a trap. It allows people to share understanding and act cooperatively, but it also carries ambiguity, hidden assumptions, and the potential for confusion. Bateson described how meaning arises from a mix of 'digital' (discrete, symbolic) and 'analogic' (continuous, relational) communication. This ambiguity becomes especially important in play, which he saw as a key to understanding how humans learn to signal intent. In play, a bite is not a real bite. A child knows it is 'just play' because of the 'meta-communicative frame'—the message 'this is not what it seems'. From here, Bateson introduced the concept of the 'double bind'. This occurs when someone receives contradictory messages, both of which are important, yet impossible to reconcile—like a parent saying, 'Be spontaneous!' The child, caught in an irresolvable loop, may develop patterns of anxiety or breakdown. Bateson saw this not as a simple psychological

[181] Wright, E. (ed.) (2005).Gregory Bateson: Epistemology, Language, Play, and the Double Bind. Nova Science Publishers.

event but as a structural flaw in communication, particularly within close, emotionally charged relationships. The double bind reveals the fragility of trust and the complexity of signalling meaning in layered human contexts. For Bateson, communication was never merely about transmitting information. It was about 'learning'—how systems correct themselves, how meaning is negotiated, and how people survive not through certainty, but through play, adaptability, and mutual framing. He warned that closed systems—whether ideological, scientific, or familial—risk collapse. Understanding requires doubt, trust, and above all, the willingness to look at the world through more than one eye.

A communication dilemma

The concept of the double bind, introduced by Gregory Bateson reveals how communication can become a psychological trap. At its core, a double bind occurs when an individual is subjected to conflicting messages within a crucial relationship, particularly one from which they cannot easily withdraw. These contradictory messages create an impossible situation where any response leads to failure or punishment, and where even recognising the paradox is forbidden. Bateson originally developed this idea in the 1950s while examining communication patterns in families affected by schizophrenia. He and his colleagues noticed that some individuals were immersed in environments where trust and affection were conditional, contingent upon decoding unclear and often self-contradictory signals. For instance, a mother might say 'I love you' while stiffening her body or averting her gaze, sending a second, opposing message through her actions. The child, bound by dependence, is unable to confront the contradiction or flee the relationship, leading to confusion that may become internalised over time. A double bind, according to Bateson, is more than a momentary contradiction; it is a structure. It involves a primary injunction—'do this or you'll suffer'—paired with a secondary, conflicting injunction, such as 'do this, but only if you want to'. A third level often blocks any attempt to question the situation, making escape or resistance impossible. The subject is left in a loop of impossible choices, where the path to resolution is obscured by emotional stakes and hierarchical constraints. Wright emphasises that these binds are not limited to pathological contexts. They exist in everyday life, embedded in family relations, educational systems, romantic dynamics, and even professional environments. A teacher might tell a student to 'be creative' while strictly grading for conformity. A boss may expect initiative but punish decisions taken without permission. These binds corrode the individual's sense of agency and blur their grasp of reality. What makes the double bind so destructive is its stealth. Unlike overt control, it operates through ambiguity and implication. Its harm is not always visible in the moment but accumulates over repeated interactions. Over time, a person subjected to chronic double binds may develop maladaptive coping strategies or dissociative patterns simply to preserve a sense of coherence. Yet Bateson also saw potential in paradox. In some therapeutic or spiritual contexts, double binds can provoke insight rather than confusion. Zen koans—riddles that defy logic—are a type of benign double bind, designed to frustrate ordinary thinking and open new dimensions of understanding. In the end, the double bind reflects a deep truth about language: that communication is not merely about information transfer but about relationship, trust, and the often-fragile structures of shared meaning.

Schismogenesis

Schismogenesis, a term coined by Gregory Bateson, refers to a process in which social behaviours—particularly patterns of interaction—become increasingly polarised through cycles of mutual reinforcement. Introduced in 'Naven' (1935), his study of the Iatmul people of New Guinea, the concept describes how cultural and interpersonal differences do not just exist

but grow over time through feedback loops that amplify rather than resolve tension. Bateson's insight was that these dynamics could either stabilise or destabilise societies depending on how they were recognised and managed. Among the Iatmul, Bateson observed that the 'naven' ritual, which involved exaggerated role reversals between men and women, served a critical function: it helped interrupt schismogenic patterns before they became destructive. He identified two primary forms. In 'symmetrical schismogenesis', individuals or groups imitate and escalate each other's behaviour competitively—such as boasting, rivalry, or arms races. In 'complementary schismogenesis', contrasting roles—like dominance and submission—intensify through reciprocal exaggeration. A dominant figure's assertiveness provokes greater passivity in a subordinate, which then encourages even more dominance, and so on. Both patterns, if left unchecked, can spiral into conflict or collapse. Bateson's work laid the foundation for understanding how certain social behaviours evolve not linearly, but in spirals of amplification. Later thinkers, such as David Graeber and David Wengrow in 'The Dawn of Everything', extended the idea to macro-historical processes, arguing that entire societies often define themselves by rejecting or opposing the traits of their neighbours. Athens and Sparta, for example, developed contrasting political and social systems—democracy versus militaristic oligarchy—not in isolation but through a kind of cultural rivalry. Similarly, indigenous groups along the Pacific Northwest and in California maintained distinct models of hierarchy or egalitarianism, shaped in part by mutual differentiation. The value of schismogenesis as a conceptual tool lies in its adaptability. It has been applied to a range of fields—from resource management to international politics. In ecological conflicts, such as overfishing or predator control, stakeholders often fall into escalating cycles of blame and reaction. In modern geopolitical strategies, schismogenic tactics have been used to deepen divisions within foreign societies. Scholars have observed, for instance, how disinformation campaigns exploit social fractures to weaken institutional trust. In such cases, conflict is not merely accidental; it is cultivated through reinforcing oppositions. Bateson also noted that interpersonal communication is susceptible to schismogenesis. Misunderstandings between people with different conversational norms can escalate unintentionally. If one person speaks loudly and the other responds by withdrawing, both may intensify their style in ways that further misalign. Even in silence, cycles of withholding can mirror the same dynamic—what Bateson called systems of mutual inhibition. Schismogenesis, then, is not a theory of conflict, but of pattern formation. It shows how behaviour, when mirrored or contrasted repeatedly, can create unintended rifts—social, cultural, psychological, or political. Bateson's insight was to recognise that to prevent the breakdown of communication, systems need rituals, frames, or practices that interrupt these spirals before they harden into permanent division.

Ecological intelligence

Gregory Bateson's contribution to ecological thought lies not in environmental science per se, but in his radical rethinking of how language and knowledge shape human interaction with the natural world. In 'Gregory Bateson's Contribution to Understanding the Linguistic Roots of the Ecological Crisis[182]', C.A. Bowers explores how Bateson's ideas challenge the deeply embedded Western belief that language is a neutral tool for transmitting objective information. Bateson disrupts this model by showing that the way people speak, think, and frame the world is already steeped in metaphorical assumptions—assumptions that often reinforce the very habits contributing to ecological collapse. At the heart of Bateson's critique

[182] Bowers, C.A. (2010) Gregory Bateson's Contribution to Understanding the Linguistic Roots of the Ecological Crisis. Cultural and Ecological Dimensions of Language and Thought.

is the recognition that knowledge systems are recursive: the frameworks people use to understand the world are themselves products of past patterns of thought. These patterns persist not because they are true, but because they are self-reinforcing. Much of modern rationality is structured by conceptual metaphors that originated in historical moments vastly different from the present ecological reality. Language, far from being transparent, functions as a map—and as Bateson famously insisted, the map is not the territory. One of Bateson's core insights is his definition of information as 'a difference that makes a difference'. This reframes understanding from the transmission of facts to the perception of change, connection, and contrast. Information is not static; it emerges in the relationship between parts of a system, be it ecological, cultural, or interpersonal. Recognising this relational structure is essential for what Bateson called 'ecological intelligence'—a way of thinking that perceives systems, interdependencies, and long-term consequences, rather than isolated facts or short-term gains. Language plays a crucial role in either supporting or obstructing ecological intelligence. Most linguistic systems, according to Bateson, smuggle in values and assumptions from their historical origins—particularly those emphasising separation, control, and domination. Words like 'progress', 'freedom', or 'growth' appear value-neutral, but they often encode anthropocentric and exploitative worldviews. These metaphors subtly encourage an extractive relationship with nature and one another. Bateson's theory of the 'double bind' further illustrates how individuals—and entire cultures—can become trapped in contradictory messages. People are told to value sustainability but live in economies that reward consumption. They are asked to protect nature while participating in systems that destroy it. These tensions cannot be resolved by technical fixes alone because they originate in the underlying logic of the language and epistemologies used to frame the problem. To break these cycles, Bateson advocates what he calls 'Level III learning': a transformative form of learning that questions the very premises on which thinking is based. This kind of learning requires a shift from individualistic to systemic perception, from manipulation to participation, from control to awareness. It is not just about knowing more, but about 'knowing differently'. By rethinking language, metaphor, and the structure of knowledge, Bateson's work invites a reorientation of how humans understand their place in the world. It is not merely a matter of better policy, but of deeper perception—of learning to see and speak in ways that honour connection over control.

Epistemology of the sacred

In 'Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred[183]', Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson explore how knowledge, communication, and meaning are embedded not only in words but in relationships, patterns, and metaphor. The book's opening metalogue, 'Why Do You Tell Stories?', is more than a conversation between father and daughter—it is an exercise in epistemology itself, a model for how people come to know the world through stories, symbols, and layered exchanges. At the heart of this exchange is the daughter's playful yet probing question: why does the father rely so heavily on stories from his own life, particularly the repeated tales of animals in zoos or abstract examples, rather than personal memories? The father replies that such stories are not truly about himself. They serve as lenses—vehicles to explore ideas about how humans signal intent, how organisms establish play, and how communication always contains metamessages. The otter, the shell, the spinal curve—all become metaphors. In Bateson's world, metaphor is not a flourish added to fact but the primary mode of understanding relationships. The structure of meaning is inseparable from the story

[183] Bateson, G. & Bateson, M.C. (1987). Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred. New York: Macmillan.

that carries it. What unfolds in the metalogue is a spiralling dialogue about logical types: talking about play, then talking about talking about play, and so on. This recursive movement is not an intellectual game but a core principle of how knowledge is structured. The daughter pushes her father to admit that even his abstractions are rooted in relational contexts. Without grounding in particularity, the higher layers collapse. As she puts it, 'you can't talk about talking unless you're grounded in something real'. The father concedes yet insists that the 'real' being discussed is not tangible like pigs or coconut palms—but patterns, relationships, the ideas of things. Throughout the dialogue, Bateson argues that meaning cannot be separated from the context of its expression. Even a professor's tone while teaching mathematics might carry messages of dominance or nurturance. Likewise, Konrad Lorenz's movements as he mimics geese while lecturing are not merely performative but embody the relational structures he is describing. Language operates on multiple levels, and understanding it requires an awareness of these shifts between content and frame, signal and metamessage. Bateson's deeper point is that all knowledge is situated, relational, and metaphorical. The way organisms grow, the shape of a conch shell, or the spiral of a spinal cord all carry their own stories—biological histories encoded in form. Humans, likewise, are shaped by recursive processes: learning, learning to learn, and learning about learning itself. These loops, rather than linear chains of cause and effect, form the structure of the sacred. For Bateson, the sacred is not an external domain removed from thought or science. It arises from recognising the complexity and interdependence of systems. In this sense, epistemology is sacred when it respects the whole—not by flattening difference, but by acknowledging the layered, recursive, and metaphor-laden nature of understanding.

Biology with meaning

In 'Bateson: Biology with Meaning[184]', Brian Goodwin revisits Gregory Bateson's enduring vision of life as a pattern of relationships, shaped not just by physical processes but by meaning. The essay proposes that modern biology is beginning to catch up with Bateson's holistic and relational thinking. Far from being a mere blueprint, DNA is now understood less as a script and more as a set of instructions that organisms interpret contextually—like language, full of nuance, ambiguity, and creative possibility. At the centre of this shift is the realisation that genetic material does not operate in a vacuum. Rather than rigid determinism, life is defined by interpretation. The same gene can be read differently depending on cellular context, environmental signals, or developmental timing. This dynamic process—seen in phenomena like alternative splicing or the role of so-called 'junk DNA'—resembles the way meaning is shaped in human communication. Organisms do not simply react; they respond, selecting what matters from a sea of possibilities. In this way, biology becomes semiotic: a living language rather than mechanical code. Goodwin argues that Bateson's contribution lies in rejecting the artificial boundary between nature and culture. For Bateson, humans are not exceptions in nature but part of its unfolding grammar. Our myths, cities, and technologies emerge from the same generative principles that govern the growth of trees, the movement of flocks, or the rhythms of ecosystems. In both biological and cultural systems, patterns of self-organisation recur. These patterns—often fractal, recursive, and non-linear—point to an aesthetic and functional unity across scales. Fractals are one example. Branches of lungs, trees, rivers, and even urban roads echo each other. These recurring forms reflect more than efficiency; they reflect an underlying coherence. Bateson would say they embody the 'pattern that connects'—a

[184] Goodwin, B. (2007). 'Bateson: Biology with Meaning', in Bateson: A Legacy for Living Systems, ed. N. C. G. Smith. Springer.

phrase he used to describe the deep structures linking life, mind, and evolution. In this sense, a city and a coral reef are not opposed, but variations on a theme, both telling stories about coherence, resilience, and adaptation. What sets Bateson apart, and what Goodwin emphasises, is the role of 'meaning' in evolution. Not just survival of the fittest, but communication, feedback, and shared structure—factors that cannot be measured without reference to context. In Bateson's world, a system must be understood in terms of its relationships and relevance. Life, then, is not reducible to function alone but expresses purpose and story through its form. To illustrate this, Goodwin draws on the Orphic Trinity—Chaos, Gaia, and Eros—archetypes that embody the interplay of randomness, order, and desire. These are not mystical metaphors but attempts to name the creative forces that structure both life and thought. Bateson believed that seeing the world this way—through the lens of pattern, relation, and meaning—was not merely poetic but necessary. Without it, we risk misunderstanding life as a set of disconnected parts rather than a web of living intelligence.

Daniel Dor

(Imagination engineered: The social origins of language)

'First we invented language. Then language changed us… The specific function of language is the instruction of imagination: unlike other systems of communication, language allows speakers to instruct their interlocutors in the process of imagining the intended experience'.
— Daniel Dor, The Instruction of Imagination

Biology, media, and language

In 'The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Social Communication Technology[185]', Daniel Dor offers a bold rethinking of what language is and how it functions—not just as a system of grammar or symbols, but as a social tool that allows humans to share imagined experiences. A professor of communication at Tel Aviv University and a political activist, Dor blends linguistics, media theory, and evolutionary biology to craft a theory of language that places communication at the centre of human evolution. At the heart of Dor's model is the idea that language is a 'communication technology', built collectively by humans over generations to instruct one another's imagination. Unlike gestures or emotional cues, which rely on shared perception in real time, language enables people to describe things not present—memories, plans, fictions, ideas. It allows a speaker to map their own mental experience into a symbolic form that listeners can reconstruct in their minds. In this sense, language is not just a set of rules, but a system designed to transfer subjective experiences between individuals. Dor departs sharply from the dominant Chomskyan model, which treats language as an innate cognitive system primarily concerned with syntax. Instead, he argues that language emerged through cultural innovation, long before the genetic adaptations that might later have made it easier to acquire. This reversal—putting culture before genes—draws on his work with evolutionary biologist Eva Jablonka, proposing a model of gene–culture coevolution in which human communication technology evolved as a shared social achievement first, with biology adapting in response. A central mechanism in Dor's theory is 'experiential mutual identification': the human ability and desire to align inner experiences through interaction. Early humans, according to Dor, developed increasingly complex ways to signal intentions and perceptions.

[185] Dor, D. (2015). The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Social Communication Technology. Oxford University Press.

These communicative efforts gradually shaped what he calls the 'symbolic landscape', a collective space of shared meanings and references that individuals navigate and reshape through every act of communication. Language, then, becomes not just a medium but a medium within media. Like print, radio, or digital platforms, it is a technology embedded in culture, subject to its norms, power dynamics, and patterns of transmission. Dor suggests that language evolves alongside other communication tools, each shaping and reflecting the symbolic world people inhabit. In this way, language is not housed in the individual brain but in the network of relationships that sustain and transform it. Dor's theory has resonated with thinkers across disciplines. Philosopher Daniel Dennett praised it for moving beyond static models of linguistic structure. Literary scholar Brian Boyd saw it as opening a new frontier of research. Linguist Andrzej Pawelec suggested it might shift the field away from narrow cognitive frameworks and toward a more socially grounded understanding of language. Dor's work invites a simple but profound reconsideration: that language is not a product of the mind alone, but a social invention—a shared, evolving technology that allows people to imagine together.

Language as innovation

In 'The Mind at Work: Daniel Dor on Language as Innovation[186]', Anthony Wing Kosner explores Israeli linguist Daniel Dor's compelling theory that language is not merely a cognitive system but a socially constructed technology—one that fundamentally reshaped human evolution and continues to drive innovation. Far from being a passive vessel for communication, Dor argues, language is humanity's most important invention: a tool designed to bridge experiential gaps and coordinate collective imagination. Dor challenges the traditional linguistic paradigm established by Noam Chomsky, which views language as a hardwired, universal grammar rooted in individual cognition. In contrast, Dor insists that language is not located in the brain of any single speaker but exists between people, in the social fabric of interaction. It is a cultural artefact, built cooperatively over generations, constantly adapting to the needs of those who use it. 'First, we invented language, then language changed us', he observes, underscoring the reciprocal relationship between cultural innovation and biological adaptation. A key part of this transformation, Dor argues, lies in language's ability to communicate what is not present—to describe imagined experiences and abstract concepts. Unlike earlier forms of communication based on direct reference—such as pointing or mimetic gestures—language lets speakers encode their inner world in symbolic form and guide listeners to reconstruct it. This ability fundamentally altered how humans think, plan, and collaborate. But Dor is quick to point out that language is not neat or ideal. Its true nature, he suggests, is found in its 'messiness'—the hesitations, corrections, misunderstandings, and adjustments that make up real-world conversations. Far from being a flaw, this imperfection is the source of language's strength. In fact, it is the adaptability of language—its ability to work despite gaps, ambiguities, and misalignments—that fuels innovation. Conversations succeed not because they are perfect, but because they are dynamic, improvisational, and responsive. This dynamism is most visible in diverse teams and high-stakes dialogue. Dor likens innovation in such environments to jazz improvisation: structured yet unpredictable, collaborative yet rooted in individuality. The key, he argues, is the effort to bridge experiential differences—to meet others across gaps in background, culture, and perspective. Innovation, in this view, is not the product of solitary genius, but of shared attempts to align divergent understandings. Dor's collaboration with evolutionary biologist Eva Jablonka adds another layer to this theory, suggesting that language emerged from a deep cultural need to coordinate understanding, and only later shaped

[186] Kosner, A. W. (2020). The Mind at Work: Daniel Dor on Language as Innovation. Medium.

the biological evolution of our species. This culturally driven model of language evolution reverses the traditional view that genes lead and culture follows. As digital platforms reshape communication, Dor warns of what is lost—subtle cues, shared space, and non-verbal signals—but also acknowledges what is gained: broader participation, new rhythms, and evolving lexicons. Even in fragmented settings, language retains its function—if people commit to listening, adjusting, and collaborating.

The social origins of language

In 'The Social Origins of Language[187]', edited by Daniel Dor, Chris Knight, and Jerome Lewis, language is redefined not as an isolated cognitive function but as a fundamentally social invention—one shaped by collective effort, cooperation, and cultural transformation. Rather than springing from a sudden genetic mutation or an abstract mental module, language, they argue, arose from the deep social and political complexities of early human life. The shift away from Chomsky's model of innate 'I-language'—a private, internal computational faculty—toward a view of language as 'socially constructed' marks a turning point in the study of its origins. Dor and his co-editors propose that language evolved not in isolation but in the dynamic space between people: a medium for instructing imagination, built through cooperative interaction. It was not something humans were simply born with, but something they 'learnt to build together', slowly, over generations. At the centre of this theory is the idea that social behaviour can precede and even direct genetic adaptation. In evolutionary terms, humans first began using rudimentary forms of symbolic communication—gestures, rituals, shared attention—and only later did biology catch up. This challenges older gene-first models and places culture, cooperation, and shared intentionality at the forefront of the story. In other words, humans did not evolve language because their brains were ready for it—they evolved language because their relationships demanded it. What made this possible, the authors argue, was an unprecedented level of trust and interdependence. Early humans had to overcome enormous social barriers—dominance hierarchies, competition for resources, and deep-rooted mistrust—to create stable communities. Shared childcare, communal hunting, fire-making, and musical rituals all played a role in fostering emotional bonds and social synchronisation. These practices did not just help people survive—they created the conditions for symbolic communication to flourish. Ritual stands out. Far from being a by-product of language, ritual may have preceded it, laying the groundwork for symbolic meaning. By creating shared experiences of emotion, rhythm, and narrative, ritual helped individuals align their perceptions and intentions. Ritual gave early humans a space to practice trust—and in doing so, made language possible. This volume also draws on insights from primatology, showing that apes already use intentional gestures and audience-sensitive calls. While these do not constitute language, they reveal the roots of communicative intent. Language emerged not from a clean break with the animal world, but from an evolutionary continuum. The final sections explore how, once established, language became a cultural force of its own. It restructured human cognition, enabling imagination, episodic memory, and abstract reasoning. It also diversified into countless forms, shaped by culture, environment, and history. What began to bridge experiential gaps became the foundation of human society.

[187] Dor, D., Knight, C., & Lewis, J. (eds.) (2014). The Social Origins of Language. Oxford University Press.

The instruction of imagination

In 'The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Communication Technology[188]', Daniel Dor proposes that language is not merely a mental capacity but a collective invention—society is first and most influential communication tool. Rather than treating language as a biological trait stored in the brain, Dor presents it as a socially engineered technology developed to help humans navigate the deep chasm between individual experiences. At its core, this book redefines language as a system for instructing the imagination, allowing people to guide others in mentally reconstructing experiences that cannot be directly shared. Human communication faces a fundamental challenge: the 'experiential gap'. Each person experiences life subjectively, shaped by memory, perception, and emotion. No one can feel what another feels or see the world exactly as another sees it. Most systems of communication—like gestures, facial expressions, or images—can only narrow this gap by presenting shared stimuli. They work best when the message is obvious or immediate. Language, however, goes further. It offers a structure that lets speakers describe distant events, inner thoughts, or abstract ideas—guiding listeners to mentally assemble and interpret those scenes themselves. Dor's central idea is that language works not by transferring thoughts but by providing 'skeletal instructions'. Words and grammar serve as scaffolding for the listener to construct imagined experiences using their own memories and cognitive resources. Unlike systems that show or point, language instructs: it says not 'look at this', but 'imagine this'. This strategy gives language a functional uniqueness. It is why people can talk about gods, governments, fictional stories, or the future—things that may never be seen or touched. This instructive function requires a shared social infrastructure. Language relies on a 'symbolic landscape'—a collectively shaped web of meanings that speakers draw from and contribute to. It also depends on a communication protocol: implicit rules and norms that help people coordinate speech and imagination. These components are developed socially, not individually, and they evolve as societies change. Crucially, Dor frames the evolution of language as a technological process. It did not emerge in a single leap but through gradual refinements. Early humans likely used experiential forms of communication—pointing, mimicking, gesturing—before developing instructive signals that allowed for deeper cooperation. The shift demanded increasing trust, especially as humans began to communicate about things unseen or uncertain. Over time, simple signals became structured sentences; shared meanings became complex grammars. The evolution of language intertwined with the evolution of cognition, emotion, and social life. Dor's model also implies that the true power of language lies in its imperfections. Real communication is messy. People misunderstand, correct, improvise, and repair their words as they go. This fluidity is not a flaw but a sign of adaptability. Language thrives not because it is precise, but because it allows users to work through their differences and adjust to each other's imagination. In viewing language as a social technology that instructs imagination, Dor offers a unifying theory that bridges cognitive science, linguistics, anthropology, and communication. It suggests that what sets humans apart is not just the ability to speak, but the ability to guide one another through shared stories, imagined realities, and the open-ended spaces of thought.

Language and its speakers

In 'The Instruction of Imagination', Daniel Dor explores how language emerged not as a static, innate faculty but as a technology gradually built by humans to solve a fundamental problem: the challenge of communicating subjective experience. The absence of fossilised

[188] Dor, D. (2015). The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Communication Technology. Oxford University Press.

traces means that understanding language evolution demands a cross-disciplinary effort—from linguistics and anthropology to neuroscience and philosophy. What unites these approaches is a shared goal: to understand how language came to define what it means to be human. The central question is not only how language began, but what kind of thing it is. Chomsky's view of language as an inborn, infinite system has dominated linguistics for decades but fails to explain how such a capacity could evolve through natural selection. Evolution favours function and adaptability. A system defined by abstraction, disconnected from practical use, cannot easily be traced back to the needs and pressures of early human life. Dor argues that this paradox pushed many researchers toward a different view: language as a tool that evolved in tandem with its users, shaped by and shaping the needs of cooperation, memory, and social complexity. Reframing language as a communication technology shifts the question. Instead of asking how a linguistic 'organ' appeared, the focus becomes: how did early humans, living in small, interdependent groups, come to invent and refine a system capable of instructing others' imaginations? Language did not evolve in isolation. It emerged in the same environment as fire, tools, and social rituals. It developed incrementally—from pointing and mimicry to shared symbols and structured combinations. These early symbolic forms helped humans communicate not just what they saw, but what they remembered, imagined, or planned. Like any technology, language changed over time. It demanded cooperation and introduced new cognitive pressures. Those better able to understand and use linguistic instructions gained advantages in survival, social cohesion, and planning. Over generations, these pressures fed back into the species' development, a process called 'genetic accommodation'. As language grew more complex, so did the brains of its speakers, leading to a spiral of co-evolution. What made language unique among other communicative systems was its instructive nature. Rather than simply expressing an emotional state or pointing to a visible object, it allowed speakers to offer frameworks for reconstructing experience. It asked listeners not to look but to imagine. This was a radical step. It required a new kind of trust—not just in what someone says, but in their intention to guide you truthfully toward something you cannot see for yourself. Language, then, was not a sudden leap but a long, cooperative project. It emerged from mutual needs, grew through shared creativity, and ultimately shaped the minds and emotions of its users. In this sense, humans invented language—and language, in turn, made humans.

Dark side of imagination

Daniel Dor explores not only how language emerged as a communication technology, but how this powerful invention carried with it a hidden potential: the ability to deceive. As language allowed humans to instruct one another's imaginations, it also created space for manipulation, distortion, and lies. What began as a shared tool for mutual understanding became a double-edged instrument—one that sharpened both cooperation and betrayal. Language is grounded in trust. Every act of communication assumes that the speaker's intention aligns with the listener's expectation of truth. This mutual assumption creates the condition that deception exploits. Unlike simple gestures or emotional cues rooted in the present moment, language opened the door to talking about what is not visible, what has not happened, or what never will. The more language extended beyond the immediate world, the more room it created for invention—for truth and falsehood alike. Dor emphasises that while animals can deceive—through camouflage, mimicry, or distraction—humans took deception to a new level. The invention of language vastly expanded the scope of the possible lie. For the first time, a person could invent entire narratives, cloak intentions in plausible language, and manipulate others without direct confrontation. The imagination, shaped by language, became capable of misleading others with stories that seemed real. The act of speaking no longer required the

speaker to show or prove anything. It only required trust. This transformation did not go unnoticed within early human communities. As some individuals grew skilled in deception, others responded with suspicion, critical thinking, and strategies of detection. Thus began an evolutionary arms race: liars improved their techniques—crafting more convincing narratives, controlling their emotional signals, and mastering the nuances of persuasion—while listeners sharpened their instincts, memory, and logical reasoning to expose fraud. In this back-and-forth, the foundations of rhetoric and epistemology were born. Persuasion and scepticism co-evolved. What emerged was a paradox: language made cooperation easier and societies more complex, but it also made betrayal more sophisticated. Those who could shape collective belief through well-placed stories gained power, often creating myths, ideologies, or systems of control. Language, Dor suggests, became a tool not just for sharing truth, but for shaping reality—sometimes to the benefit of all, but just as often to the benefit of the few. Deception in language is not a bug, but a feature—an inevitable consequence of imagination. By giving humans the ability to speak of what is not, language demanded vigilance in separating invention from illusion. The same tool that allowed people to dream, remember, and explain also allowed them to exploit, mislead, and dominate. This dual legacy is built into the very structure of human communication.

Reassembling the puzzle

'The Instruction of Imagination' offers a new vision of language: not a static structure or an internal grammar, but a social communication technology crafted collectively to instruct the imagination. This perspective shifts focus from the internal mechanisms of language to the external relationships it enables—how people construct meaning together across experiential gaps. Language, in this sense, becomes less a product of individual cognition and more an emergent property of interaction, identification, and mutual understanding. Dor's approach brings together disciplines that have long studied language in isolation. By proposing that language's central purpose is to guide the imagination of others, he provides a conceptual framework for uniting cognitive science, social theory, semiotics, and evolutionary biology under one task: understanding how human beings use signs to build shared realities. This reintegration of fragmented linguistic thought mirrors what language itself does—organising and translating private experience into a format that others can grasp, however imperfectly. At its core, language functions in the social domain. It enables communication not by directly transferring thoughts but by building bridges through signs—abstract, socially agreed-upon tools that shape how people talk about, and even experience, the world. Every word carries with it a tension: between the speaker's private experience and the social structure that gives the word its meaning. Language is thus always negotiating between the personal and the public, the analogue and the categorical. This tension explains why communication can never be fully precise, and why it often reveals as much about society as it does about individual thought. Despite the seeming stability of grammar or semantics, Dor reminds us that language is not a closed system. It changes constantly, shaped by new experiences, needs, and constraints. Its norms are formal only in a limited sense: not rigid rules but practical conventions developed through interaction. This openness explains the proliferation of languages, dialects, and registers across the globe. Each represents a unique response to the challenges of social life and imagination. Language, in Dor's account, is not only creative but dangerous. It enables cooperation, but also deception. It strengthens bonds yet can deepen divisions. It equips humans with the imaginative power to invent and share complex ideas, yet it binds that freedom to socially approved forms. Language gives power to those who can command imagination—leaders, storytellers, propagandists—and remains dependent on trust, which is always

vulnerable to manipulation. Understanding language, then, requires a shift in perspective. It is not a fixed code or a mental organ, but a living, evolving phenomenon. It is energetic—something people do together, not something they merely possess. In this view, the study of language becomes a study of people: how they relate, imagine, and co-create the world.

From experience to imagination

In 'From Experience to Imagination: Language and Its Evolution as a Social Communication Technology[189]', Daniel Dor advances a compelling rethinking of how language came into being. He argues that language should not be viewed simply as a biological adaptation or an individual cognitive mechanism, but as a social technology—gradually invented and refined by early humans to solve a specific problem: how to instruct one another's imagination. Before language, human communication depended heavily on shared experience. People could signal danger, point to food, or mimic basic actions, but they could not describe events that were not immediately visible or recreate experiences that only they had witnessed. This limitation became increasingly constraining as human societies grew more complex. At some point, pre-linguistic humans—likely 'Homo erectus'—found themselves needing to communicate what could not be directly seen or shown. They began to experiment with symbolic systems that could stand in for absent realities. This marked the birth of language—not as a pre-wired instinct, but as a creative, collective solution to a shared problem. According to Dor, language was not built all at once. It developed incrementally through trial and error, shaped by social pressures and reinforced by communicative success. Once early signs and vocalisations began to function reliably as instructions for imagining shared ideas, a feedback loop emerged. The more useful language became, the more society demanded it. As communication became richer and more complex, individuals who could better navigate this emerging system—through clearer articulation, sharper memory, or deeper empathy—began to thrive. Over generations, these skills led to partial genetic accommodation, favouring those with the physiological and cognitive capacities to speak, listen, and imagine with greater precision. Crucially, this evolutionary path did not produce a universal, uniform linguistic ability. Dor emphasises that language emerged through collective invention, not from a sudden biological mutation. Human beings co-evolved with language as they used and adapted it, meaning that linguistic aptitude—like literacy or musicality—is distributed variably across individuals and communities. This theory shifts the longstanding debate about the origin of language away from isolated minds and fixed grammars, toward a more grounded and dynamic understanding of communication. It presents language as a system that began outside the mind, in social interaction, and only later came to reshape human cognition from within. It also reframes the 'evolutionary bottleneck' not as a mystery to be solved by invoking innate universals, but as a puzzle that makes sense only when language is seen as an evolving tool for bridging mental worlds. By repositioning language as a socially engineered technology for imagination, Dor opens new paths for unifying linguistic theory with anthropology, evolutionary biology, and communication studies. The result is not only a novel hypothesis about the past, but also a richer way to understand how people continue to build meaning together in the present.

The role of the lie

The capacity to lie is often viewed as a disruptive side-effect of language—an unfortunate loophole in a system designed for cooperation. Yet in 'The Role of the Lie in the Evolution of

[189] Dor, D. (2016). From Experience to Imagination: Language and Its Evolution as a Social Communication Technology. Elsevier.

Human Language[190]', Daniel Dor turns this view on its head, arguing that deception was not an accidental consequence of linguistic evolution, but a central driver of it. Language, far from being a purely honest medium, developed precisely because it enabled speakers to go beyond what could be immediately verified—to instruct others' imaginations, to speculate, and crucially, to fabricate. Dor builds on his earlier work in which he defines language as a 'social communication technology'. Unlike the fixed, present-oriented signalling systems of animals, human language can conjure possibilities far removed from direct experience. It enables people to share not just facts, but fictions, opinions, desires, and speculations. This imaginative capacity is what makes language powerful—and dangerous. The ability to lie, in this view, is not a flaw in the system, but a feature that shaped its growth. Language freed humans from the need to verify every claim through shared perception. This made deception easier. A person could say, 'There's a lion behind the hill', or 'The spirits told me I should lead', and unless others could check, they had to decide whether to believe. Trust thus became a fundamental ingredient of linguistic communication. But trust also opened the door for exploitation. The very conditions that make communication effective—shared codes, mutual understanding—also make it vulnerable. Dor suggests that language and lying entered a kind of evolutionary spiral. As some individuals became better at bending truth to their advantage, others became more skilled at detecting falsehoods. This ongoing tension shaped not only linguistic development but also social and cognitive evolution. Imagination, memory, empathy, and suspicion—traits essential to both effective lying and detecting lies—were refined through this dynamic. Importantly, deception was not only antisocial. Dor points out that not all lies are malicious. Many serve social purposes: smoothing interactions, avoiding conflict, preserving harmony. The rise of rhetorical skill, storytelling, and even politeness are tied to the same capacity that enables lying. These cultural practices demonstrate that the line between deception and communication is not always clear-cut. Language is both a bridge and a mask. In this light, the lie is not simply a threat to linguistic order—it is part of the reason that order became necessary in the first place. The evolution of grammar, logic, and narrative structure can be seen as attempts to manage the tension between truth and fiction. What emerged was not a pure system of truth, but a flexible and adaptive tool capable of navigating a world where motives are hidden and appearances deceive. Language, Dor concludes, is as much a product of deception as it is of cooperation. It grew not despite lies, but because of them.

The emergence of lying

In 'The Instruction of Imagination', Daniel Dor proposes that lying was not an original feature of language but emerged gradually once language began to move beyond high-stakes survival contexts where honesty was essential. In its earliest phases, language evolved to instruct imagination in situations of epistemic dependency—contexts where the speaker and listener depended on each other's accurate descriptions of experience. Under such conditions, deception was unlikely; trust was a matter of survival. But as language entered more social and less immediately vital domains, the tight coupling between communication and trust loosened. Humans, already capable of mimetic deception through gesture and emotion, began to realise that language could do more than represent reality—it could distort it, suggest alternatives, and create illusions. The lie, however, demanded a new kind of imagination. Unlike honest communication, which merely replays what is known, lying requires constructing an entirely false world in the listener's mind. The liar must know what is true, imagine what is false, and anticipate how the lie will be interpreted and believed. This cognitive leap fundamentally

[190] Dor, D. (2016). The role of the lie in the evolution of human language. Elsevier.

changed the dynamics of language. Not everyone adopted deception equally. Some individuals began to explore its potential; others remained naive or unsuspecting. Variability in both lying and lie-detection introduced new social configurations. Dor outlines three relational types that emerged: in Type A, dominant liars exploited less discerning listeners; in Type C, powerful lie-detectors curtailed the success of unskilled liars; and in Type B, an arms race emerged between equally skilled liars and detectors. These interactions set the stage for more complex communication systems, where truth and fiction coexisted and competed. As lying became more common, social hierarchies amplified its effects. High-status individuals could lie with fewer consequences, manipulating others or protecting their own interests. Low-status individuals, meanwhile, may have turned to strategic half-truths or flattery to avoid punishment. Small lies became tools of survival. Honest alliances emerged within groups, especially for vital information, while deception was often reserved for interactions with outsiders or rivals. Crucially, Dor ties this development to the structure of early human communities. As societies grew—around 150 individuals, according to Dunbar's estimate—language was forced to adapt. Communication had to bridge not only physical distances but also social absences. Gossip became central. It allowed people to talk about others who were not present, managing reputation and cohesion. But it also introduced uncertainty: Was the gossip true? The rise of indirect communication brought a corresponding rise in deception. Over time, the very imagination cultivated by honest language use allowed for counterfactual speech. As people became skilled in imagining what others said, did, or might do, they also became able to construct and detect lies. Lying thus did not disrupt language—it completed it, driving its complexity forward. Culturally, deception fed symbolic life. Myths, fictions, and shared illusions are built on the same imaginative faculties as lies. In societies where lying is feared, pretend-play and storytelling are often restricted. In this way, the fear of deception can limit imagination itself, revealing how closely language, lying, and cultural expression are entwined. Lying also shaped human cognition. To deceive linguistically, one must build plausible false worlds and anticipate how others will interpret them. To detect lies, one must track inconsistencies, read intentions, and reason about hidden meanings. These pressures fostered higher-order thinking, empathy, and flexible imagination—traits that now define human intelligence. Lying, then, was not an accident in the story of language.

Robin Dunbar

(Vocal grooming: Gossip, groups, and the limits of connection)

'Gossip is the social glue that binds our large-scale societies together—it's not frivolous; it's essential'.

— Robin Dunbar, Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language

Grooming and gossip

Before language, primates bonded through grooming—touching, picking, and stroking that reinforced trust and connection. Grooming was not only hygienic but also political, emotional, and social. It resolved tensions, affirmed alliances, and reminded individuals of their place in the group. But as group sizes expanded, grooming everyone individually became unfeasible. In 'Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language[191]' Robin Dunbar's

[191] Dunbar, R. (2011). Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language. Faber & Faber.

hypothesis is that humans solved this problem by replacing physical contact with sound—vocal grooming. Talking, he argues, became the new way to maintain social bonds. In his book, Dunbar suggests that the origin of language lies not in the need to describe the world or share technical knowledge, but in the need to keep track of relationships in ever-growing groups. Words, at their evolutionary root, are not about facts—they are about people. Gossip, the first true use of language, allowed early humans to manage their social networks more efficiently. Unlike grooming, which is limited to one-on-one contact, gossip could be shared with several listeners at once, making it vastly more efficient. It kept track of who could be trusted, who had cheated, who was rising or falling in status. But this innovation came at a cost. The human brain—especially the neocortex—expanded to process this social information, and it became one of the most energy-hungry organs in the body. This shift was not about expressing abstract thoughts or cosmic ideas; it was about managing relationships. Language, in its early days, was not the voice of reason or philosophy—it was social glue. Most human speech today still revolves around social matters. Studies show that two-thirds of conversation is devoted to relationships, reputations, and social alliances. This mirrors grooming among monkeys: repetitive, intimate, sometimes seemingly pointless, but always socially significant. In both cases, the content often does not matter as much as the connection it sustains. Dunbar highlights that language became a new terrain for social behaviour: it allowed people to assert dominance without fighting, apologise without submission, spread reputations without direct observation. It also introduced risks: lies, manipulations, exaggerations. But these, too, became part of the game. Language gave people the tools to manage not only reality but appearances. Language also transformed identity. Accents, dialects, and shared vocabulary became signs of belonging. One speaks like a group or does not. Language divides just as much as it unites. In large societies, language can sort people by class, tribe, or allegiance as easily as by meaning. Although no other animal species developed anything close to human language, Dunbar's approach emphasises continuity, not rupture. Language did not appear suddenly as a tool of reason—it grew gradually out of the emotional, social needs inherited from primate ancestors. Language may be humanity's most remarkable tool, but its evolutionary origins are intimate and ordinary. Not logic, but bonding. Not theory, but gossip. What sets humans apart is not that they talk—it is what they talk 'about'.

First words

Language did not arrive all at once, nor was it born from a single invention. According to Robin Dunbar, its roots lie in the basic social needs of early human groups, particularly the challenge of maintaining relationships as group sizes expanded. Dunbar suggests that vocal communication evolved as a solution to the time limitations of manual grooming, which primates use to bond and reinforce social alliances. As hominin groups grew beyond the sizes manageable by grooming alone, a new, more efficient system was needed—language began to gossip, to manage social life through sound. But what form did these first vocal interactions take? One hypothesis is that early humans used simple calls or vocalisations—perhaps like those of our primate relatives—that gradually became more structured. These might have started as emotionally charged noises and evolved into shared signals for objects, actions, or social relationships. Other theories suggest that gestures, perhaps even pantomimes, were a precursor to spoken language, supported by shared neural systems involved in tool use and movement. A third idea, the 'song hypothesis', holds that music-like vocalisations were the foundation, carrying emotional resonance that later became symbolic meaning. Each possibility has limitations. Gestures require visual contact and do not travel far. Songs tap into emotion but lack the clarity needed for detailed communication. Primate-style calls are limited in variety.

Yet all of them highlight one fact: language likely developed gradually, pieced together from different cognitive and physical capabilities already in place. The ability to breathe rhythmically, coordinate tongue and lip movement, and manage pitch and tone—these were prerequisites that slowly came together. Vocal language offered specific advantages. Sound travels in the dark, across obstacles, and through space. Unlike gesture, it can reach multiple people at once. And, critically, it can blend emotional expression with referential meaning. Some primates already display turn-taking, symbolic calling, and vowel-like sounds, suggesting that the leap to early proto-language may not have been as abrupt as it seems. Neurologically, language recruits both hemispheres of the brain—left for structure and logic, right for emotion and rhythm. Early humans likely used both aspects, shaping a mode of communication that was emotionally resonant but also precise enough to convey social and environmental information. The first words, then, were probably neither pure song nor pure sign, but a hybrid form emerging from a need to share, warn, flirt, plan, and bond. Language was a social technology before it was a cognitive one. It solved the problem of too many people and not enough time to touch them all. From those first murmurs and signs, humans built the powerful tool we now take for granted: an ever-evolving bridge between minds.

Babel's legacy

Language, perhaps the most distinctive human trait, also proves to be among the most volatile. Unlike other evolutionary adaptations, it rarely stands still. Over time, languages not only change but splinter, sometimes so quickly and dramatically that descendants of the same tongue can become mutually incomprehensible in a few short centuries. Robin Dunbar, in 'Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language', highlights this restless churn, noting how Latin fractured into French, Italian, and Spanish in just two millennia, or how English has evolved so fast that Chaucer's Middle English already reads like a foreign dialect. Why does this happen? If language evolved to promote cohesion and communication, why does it so easily slide toward division? One explanation is geography. As early human populations spread across continents, they often became isolated by mountains, rivers, deserts, or sheer distance. This physical separation meant speech patterns developed in parallel, slowly drifting apart. Over generations, dialects diverged, and once-communal tongues turned into separate languages. But isolation alone does not tell the whole story. Cultural and social factors add to this divergence. Language, besides being a communication tool, also carries deep symbolic weight. It signals identity, belonging, even resistance. New dialects often emerge to mark political separation or emphasise cultural uniqueness. In some cases, groups deliberately preserve or create linguistic differences as a form of boundary-making—subtly or overtly declaring who they are by how they speak. Yet language does not just drift; it innovates. People experiment, play with words, coin phrases, and shift pronunciations. These micro-changes accumulate and spread unevenly through a community. The process is subtle but inexorable. Add in migrations, intergroup mixing, or cultural revolutions, and the pace of change accelerates. The quest to understand how all these tongues relate has led linguists to search for language families and ancestral roots. Beginning in the 18th century with Sir William Jones, scholars noticed uncanny similarities between distant languages like Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. This insight laid the groundwork for the reconstruction of the Indo-European family, believed to have sprung from a common language spoken around 5,000–6,000 BCE in Eurasia. Through comparative linguistics, other possible superfamilies were later proposed—Nostratic, Dene-Caucasian, even a hypothetical 'proto-World'. But going back beyond 6,000 years becomes speculative. Too much time erases too many clues. Sound shifts, semantic drift, and syntactic changes muddy the waters, making deep reconstruction difficult if not impossible. Still, the similarities that remain—like shared

structures, vowel patterns, or root words for body parts and basic actions—suggest a common mental blueprint for language. So, if the mythical Tower of Babel did not cause linguistic diversity, what did? Probably a mixture of accident, geography, innovation, and identity. Language is a living thing, and living things evolve. In some ways, fragmentation is the price of flexibility—proof of how language adapts to the needs, environments, and desires of its speakers. And despite this chaotic diversity, the deep structure of language stays constant. All human languages, no matter how remote or exotic, perform the same task: they help people connect. In that sense, Babel's legacy is not confusion but creativity—a reminder that our differences rest on a shared capacity to speak, listen, and understand.

The dynamics of chaos

Language is both humanity's most sophisticated tool and one of its most unpredictable. Despite its purpose as a medium for shared understanding, it fragments relentlessly. There are currently around 5,000 spoken languages, yet over half are expected to vanish within a few generations. As older speakers die and younger ones adopt global tongues like English or Mandarin, we are witnessing a collapse of linguistic diversity on a massive scale. Paradoxically, while languages disappear, new dialects and variations are constantly forming—suggesting that language is not merely a stable system but a self-replicating, chaotic force. Dunbar explores this dynamic instability and notes that language behaves less like a fixed code and more like a social organism. Every group, from a street gang to a nation, subtly modifies language to express solidarity, belonging, and difference. English, having spread worldwide, now appears in forms as divergent as Jamaican Patois, Nigerian English, and Scottish dialects—many of which are mutually unintelligible. This continual branching suggests language thrives in tension between unification and fragmentation. Dunbar links this instability to migration. Language spreads and changes with human movement. As modern humans migrated out of Africa and across the globe, new linguistic families took shape. Some patterns can be traced—such as Indo-European expansion from the Danube basin, or the Austronesian spread from Southeast Asia to Madagascar and Polynesia. Agricultural revolutions, climate shifts, and later empires shaped the linguistic map further, but the pattern remains: migration stirs the linguistic pot. Yet isolation alone does not account for the rate at which languages change. Social forces play an equal role. Dialects serve as social filters, marking who belongs and who does not. This is not just cultural snobbery; it is an evolved function. Groups that can exclude outsiders prevent exploitation. Rapid dialect change, Dunbar notes, acts like a password system. If you cannot speak the dialect fluently, you are marked as an outsider. Computer models support this. Linguist Dan Nettle simulated language change in cooperative communities. When dialects shifted quickly, it became hard for free-riders—those who took without giving—to integrate. In this view, language's instability is protective. The confusion of Babel was not a punishment; it was a defence mechanism. Kinship also underlies language's evolution. People use dialects to strengthen bonds with those they trust, often kin or kin-like networks. Even in modern societies, terms like 'brother' and 'sister' maintain these symbolic ties. Language preserves identity, filters loyalty, and reinforces emotional bonds. It is not just how people communicate—it is how they signal who they are. Population density accelerates this dynamic. In densely populated regions, like West Africa or the South Pacific, linguistic diversity skyrockets. As groups form tight clusters, their languages splinter more quickly to maintain group identity. Sedentary agricultural life amplified this, making language an even sharper social boundary. Despite its chaos, language remains central to human cohesion. It evolves because people evolve. It fragments not despite its purpose, but because division serves a purpose—creating order, belonging, and meaning within the noise.

Language permeates human culture

Language saturates every part of human culture. It is more than a tool—it is the very scaffolding of our social lives, from storytelling and ritual to science and diplomacy. In 'Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language', Robin Dunbar argues that language is not a late addition to human progress but a product of our evolutionary history, shaped to serve the needs of early human communities. Long before global societies and digital networks emerged, humans lived in small groups. The mental structures that developed in those settings still guide how people think, interact, and organise life today. This mismatch between ancient minds and modern society creates friction. Language evolved in groups no larger than 150 individuals, where people knew one another personally and communication reinforced trust, empathy, and cooperation. Our brains still expect that level of intimacy and face-to-face engagement. When surrounded by the anonymity of cities or the noise of social media, people often feel disoriented or disconnected. That sense of alienation is not a personal failing—it is a sign that modern environments often stretch our evolutionary design to its limits. Yet, this realisation should not lead to pessimism. The same evolution that built these cognitive structures also endowed humans with flexibility. Primates in general—and humans especially—are good at adjusting behaviour within constraints. What is needed is not to deny our mental architecture but to design better cultural systems around it. Acknowledging our predispositions helps create environments where people feel more connected and fulfilled. This may involve rebuilding smaller, more meaningful social networks within large-scale societies. Neighbourhoods, cooperatives, clubs, and even tight-knit online communities can replicate the intimacy of early social groups. Shared rituals—like meals, music, or recurring events—also reawaken the bonding power of traditional human gatherings. Even in the workplace, teams function best when structured to mirror the cooperation and accountability found in small communities. Technology, too, can be redirected to serve these needs. While many digital tools isolate or overstimulate, they can also be used to create empathy, bridge distances, and simulate the immediacy of in-person connection—if designed with these priorities in mind. At the same time, education systems can reinforce our adaptive strengths by teaching not just facts, but emotional literacy, storytelling, and flexibility. Human behaviour is not fixed. It emerges from the continuous tension between biology and environment. By recognising our evolutionary baggage and designing around it, people can soften the sharper edges of modern life. Dunbar's point is not that people are trapped by their past, but that they thrive best when present conditions respect deep-seated psychological needs. The future of human flourishing depends not on transcending evolution, but on making peace with it.

How many friends does one person need?

Human morality is often viewed as the pinnacle of civilisation, a fragile contract upheld by laws, customs, and belief systems. But what if its foundation lies not in abstract philosophy, but in our biology? In 'How Many Friends Does One Person Need?[192]', Robin Dunbar explores this idea by tracing the cognitive limits and evolutionary quirks that shape social life and ethical understanding. One of the book's key insights is that moral behaviour—so often thought of as a cultural achievement—has deep evolutionary roots shaped by our brains and the scale of our social lives. Modern neuroscience supports this idea. Brain imaging studies consistently reveal that moral decisions engage specific areas of the brain, such as the insula and the right temporal-

[192] Dunbar, R. (2011). How Many Friends Does One Person Need? Harvard University Press.

parietal junction. These areas are activated when people evaluate fairness, perceive norm violations, or infer the intentions of others. Moral judgments, it turns out, are not just about logic or rules. They are emotionally loaded and socially tuned, shaped by empathy, memory, and the ability to imagine another's thoughts—a faculty known as 'theory of mind'. Theory of mind is central to understanding human ethics. While most animals operate with limited social awareness, humans are capable of fifth-order intentionality: not only do people know what others think, but they know what others think others think, and so on. This recursive thinking makes complex moral reasoning possible. It allows humans to cooperate in large groups, invent legal systems, and construct religious doctrines. Without this depth of intentionality, moral systems would collapse into short-term, one-on-one interactions. Interestingly, the evolutionary journey of morality aligns closely with the growth of the neocortex, especially regions tied to language, memory, and planning. As early humans began living in larger groups, social coordination became essential for survival. Punishing free-riders, rewarding cooperators, and maintaining reputations became collective concerns. Morality—initially a way to manage relationships—eventually crystallised into cultural codes and ethical philosophies. Other primates, like chimpanzees, display what might be considered proto-moral behaviour. They reconcile after fights, show empathy in certain situations, and understand basic fairness. However, they rarely engage in actions that reflect concern for future consequences or unseen observers—two traits common in human morality. Their intentions are limited in scope, and they do not construct symbolic systems to uphold ethical behaviour across time and space. What sets humans apart is not empathy alone, but the scale and structure of moral thinking. Human beings can imagine a god watching over them or feel guilt about a decision that no one witnessed. Such behaviour depends on a highly developed brain and a deep cultural framework. Dunbar's work suggests that this complexity arises not from pure rationality, but from the evolutionary pressures of living in groups just big enough to strain cognitive limits. If morality is indeed a product of biology shaped by social scale, then ethics is not a fixed ideal, but a flexible adaptation. And like all adaptations, it can be nurtured, neglected, or extended—perhaps even beyond our species.

How evolution found God

In 'How religion evolved : and why it endures'(2022) Dunbar is examining religion's origins. The mystical stance of religion has long puzzled scientists and philosophers alike. Why would a species concern with survival and reproduction invent stories about unseen beings, enforce complex rituals, and devote energy to moral codes rooted in supernatural authority? From an evolutionary standpoint, such practices seem inefficient or even detrimental. Yet religion has persisted in every known human society, often occupying a central place in culture. One possible explanation is that religion is not just a cultural artefact—but a by-product of the very same evolutionary forces that shaped language, cooperation, and cognition. Language, as a uniquely human trait, enabled early hominins to communicate across space and time, imagine alternative realities, and coordinate in large social groups. With it came the power of narrative—the ability to explain, persuade, and bind individuals through shared symbols. In this context, God did not descend from the heavens; God emerged from language. The act of naming, storytelling, and invoking unseen forces gave early humans a new kind of authority: the authority of meaning. Religion, then, may have emerged not despite evolution but because of it. Language made it possible to imagine agents who were not present, including those who watched from above. Once people could speak of intentions and minds, it was only a matter of time before they imagined the ultimate mind—one that sees all and judges all. This is not merely myth-making; it is cognitive elaboration on evolved mental capacities. Humans naturally seek

patterns, assign agency to events, and prefer meaningful explanations over randomness. These tendencies, once shaped by the need to detect predators or read social cues, gave rise to beliefs in gods, spirits, and fate. Religious ideas offered an adaptive framework. Belief in supernatural punishment, for instance, can deter antisocial behaviour more effectively than human enforcement alone. Groups that believed in moral gods likely outcompeted those that did not—not because their gods were real, but because shared beliefs enhanced trust, reduced internal conflict, and enabled cooperation on a larger scale. Rituals strengthened this bond. Singing, dancing, fasting, and chanting released endorphins and reinforced group identity. These acts were costly but honest signals of commitment—hard to fake and easy to observe. Moreover, religion helped navigate the tension between individuality and group cohesion. While individuals might benefit from cheating or shirking duties, communities thrived when members acted altruistically. By embedding morality in divine command, religion externalised conscience and made moral behaviour a collective imperative. The gods became guardians of social contracts. Cognitively, religion required new levels of mental complexity. Humans had to manage not only their own beliefs but their understanding of others' beliefs—what cognitive scientists call theory of mind. Higher-order intentionality, such as 'I believe that you believe that God wants us to act morally', allowed for the development of doctrine, authority, and communal identity. Without language and this recursive thinking, religion as we know it would not exist. Thus, religion is not a flaw in human reasoning but a feature of evolutionary intelligence. It grew from the soil of language, imagination, social need, and cognitive sophistication. It bound scattered individuals into moral communities and offered existential comfort in a chaotic world. Evolution did not erase the divine—it invented it.

Social brain, religious mind

In 'Religion, the Social Brain and the Mystical Stance[193]', Robin Dunbar argues that religion evolved to promote social cohesion in large human groups. It began as immersive trance-based rituals and later developed formal doctrines. Modern religions, he suggests, overlay these ancient forms, and the enduring mystical stance explains the recurring emergence of cults and sects within major traditions. The social lives of mammals, especially primates, are full of tension. Individuals often pull in different directions, each with their own goals and interests. This centrifugal pressure, if unchecked, threatens to fragment the group. Among monkeys and apes, this problem is managed through social grooming—a behaviour that not only maintains hygiene but, more importantly, reinforces trust and emotional bonds. Grooming works well in small groups, but it has strict limits. It is time-consuming, requiring one-on-one attention, and as a result, primate groups rarely exceed about fifty members. Humans, however, surpassed this threshold. Though early hunter-gatherer bands remained small, they were embedded in larger, layered structures—bands nested within communities, which themselves formed mega-bands and tribes. These larger units demanded new mechanisms to hold them together. Grooming was no longer enough. Something more scalable was needed. The human brain found a solution. Even though we lost most of our body hair, we did not lose the neurological systems that made grooming so rewarding. Gentle touch still activates endorphin release, creating feelings of calm and connection. But to manage larger groups, early humans had to simulate these effects in other ways. They developed behaviours that triggered bonding chemicals in more people at once—what might be called 'virtual grooming'. Laughter, singing,

[193] Dunbar, R. (2020). Religion, the social brain and the mystical stance. Archive for the Psychology of Religion, 42(1), pp.46–62. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/0084672419900547.

dancing, storytelling, feasting, and ritual all serve this purpose. They trigger endorphins, synchronise emotions, and foster unity. Unlike grooming, which ties together a pair, these cultural practices can bond dozens or even hundreds at once. Shared laughter or song makes people feel seen, safe, and part of something greater. Watching an emotional story can bind strangers into a temporary kinship through shared empathy and neural resonance. Of all these bonding tools, religious ritual may be the most potent. It engages people physically and emotionally. Rhythmic movement, chanting, shared silence, and symbolic gestures all produce the neurochemical effects of intimacy. Even more, religious experiences often carry a personal intensity akin to falling in love. Many mystics, across cultures, describe their relationship to the divine in romantic terms. God is not just obeyed or worshipped but loved. The mind's ability to imagine what others are thinking—called 'mentalising'—is critical to both religion and social bonding. This ability allows people to build complex ideas about gods: what they want, what they know, and how they judge. Humans can operate at fifth-order intentionality: 'I believe that you think that we both believe that God wants us to act this way'. This is an enormous leap from the second-order mindreading seen in other primates and is crucial for building shared belief systems. Religions offer more than belief—they provide structure for belonging. Research shows that people bond most with those who share key traits: language, birthplace, education, hobbies, values, music, and humor. Religion clusters many of these into one package. It creates in-groups with shared songs, codes, taboos, and cosmologies. The result is a system that binds people together at the deepest level—emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually. Finally, brain studies confirm that religious rituals and experiences activate the same regions involved in social bonding. The brain's default mode network, which processes self-awareness and others' perspectives, lights up during prayer and meditation. Endorphin-rich circuits flood the system with warmth and reassurance. It is no surprise that religious practice often boosts mental health and social trust. In sum, as human groups grew larger and more complex, religion evolved not just as a set of beliefs but as a vital tool for cohesion. It helped early communities hold together, creating unity through shared stories, rituals, and feelings of sacred connection. The religious mind is, at heart, a social mind, designed not just to understand the world—but to hold people together.

Daniel Everett

(Language as invention: Rethinking language through culture)

'We invented language to allow one person to guide the imagination of another'.

— Daniel L. Everett, The Instruction of Imagination

'Language is a tool shaped by culture and used to build a communal reality'.

— Daniel L. Everett, Language: The Cultural Tool

The gift of Prometheus

In 'Language: The Cultural Tool[194]', Daniel Everett draws a compelling comparison between fire and language, using the myth of Prometheus to explore what sets humans apart. Prometheus, whose name means 'forethought', defies the gods by giving fire to humans, allowing them to survive and build civilisation. This myth illustrates how a tool—once

[194] Everett, D. (2012). Language: The Cultural Tool. New York: Pantheon

forbidden—can catalyse human transformation. But Everett suggests that fire, powerful as it is, pales in comparison to the true engine of human culture: language. Language, unlike fire, is not a force borrowed from nature but something wholly human-made. While fire offers warmth and light, language creates understanding, identity, and collective memory. For Everett, it is language—not tools or genes—that most fully explains the complexity of human life. It is what allows people to pass knowledge across generations, to collaborate in groups far beyond the size typical of other primates, and to shape worlds of meaning beyond what is immediately visible or known. The biblical story of Babel, in contrast to the Greek myth of Prometheus, presents language as dangerous. In Genesis, God breaks the unity of humankind by introducing linguistic diversity, seeing shared speech as a threat. This divine fragmentation, however, produces not weakness but strength. The multiplication of languages reflects the adaptability of the human mind and the diversity of cultures—what Everett sees not as a punishment, but as a flourishing. Language, in Everett's view, is a solution crafted by humans in response to their environment, not an innate module pre-wired into the brain. He argues that it developed slowly, shaped by culture and necessity, rather than appearing suddenly through a genetic mutation. Just as early humans learnt to control fire over generations, they created language as a response to social and communicative demands. It became a means not only to name the world but to negotiate relationships, tell stories, and forge group identities. This view positions language as a cultural artefact—a tool made by people, shaped by context. Like fire, language is versatile, adapting to different needs and pressures. Its diversity across cultures is not accidental; it reflects how people solve problems specific to their environments. A language rich in tense and aspect may emerge in societies where tracking time is crucial; one with simple structures may develop where speed and efficiency are more valuable. Language, then, is neither universal in form nor fixed in origin. It is a flexible system moulded by use, history, and belief. Everett's project is not simply to explain how language works, but to reframe what it 'is'. He challenges the idea of a universal grammar embedded in the brain, suggesting instead that language is more like fire: invented, passed on, modified, and harnessed for human goals. It emerges from the interaction of brain, culture, and environment—not from biology alone. Language, he argues, is the Promethean gift humans gave to themselves. It has allowed people to build civilisations, bind generations, and create meaning where none existed. Unlike fire, it illuminates not just the world around but the inner lives of others. It is through language that humans share their fears, beliefs, and hopes, making it the most powerful tool ever forged.

The cultural tool

Daniel Everett weaves personal experience with cultural insight to explore language not as a prewired instinct, but as an invention born of necessity—an adaptive tool much like fire or the bow and arrow. He recounts a pivotal moment during his 1976 jungle survival training in Chiapas, where even a machete could not secure food. Watching another camper bring down an animal with a bow and arrow left him stunned—not only by the effectiveness of the tool but by the realisation that some challenges demand the right instrument, not brute effort. This moment stayed with him as a lesson about tools: the right one changes everything. Language, Everett argues, is humanity's most powerful tool—not because it is genetically encoded, but because it is culturally invented and shared. Just as the bow and arrow emerged to solve the problem of fast-moving prey, language arose to solve the challenge of coordinating thought, emotion, and action in increasingly complex social settings. Unlike fire, which can be found in nature, or a spear, which can be carved alone, language depends on interaction. It is not built in isolation, but collectively, through social life. Everett challenges the theory that language is hardwired into the brain via a universal grammar. Instead, he proposes that language is a cultural

response to the human need for cooperation. Every society solves communication problems in its own way, and language reflects those solutions. The structure of a given language, its complexity or simplicity, is not dictated by biology but by the functional demands of the community. This view redefines language as an extension of tool use. It allows humans not only to share information, but to shape social bonds, pass down knowledge, and define roles. In the Amazon, Everett observed that the Kĩsedje and Pirahã peoples use speech not simply to express thoughts, but to perform rituals, settle disputes, and create solidarity. Their language is shaped by their cultural values—what matters is not what 'can' be said, but what 'needs' to be said in their world. Language, then, is no more universal in its form than any other cultural artefact. Its diversity—of grammar, sound, and expression—mirrors the diversity of human environments and histories. Just as blues music emerged from a specific cultural context, so does every language reflect the struggles, hopes, and habits of its speakers. Language is a mirror of the human condition: flexible, inventive, shaped by experience. Everett sees this not as a limit, but as a gift. Recognising language as a cultural invention means accepting its mutability—and celebrating its richness. The loss of any language is not just the disappearance of words, but of a way of seeing the world, a solution forged over generations to the basic challenge of being human together. Language is not given—it is made. And like all great tools, its power lies not in its structure, but in its use.

Does Plato have a problem?

'Language: The Cultural Tool' questions a long-dominant assumption: that language is an innate biological faculty, hardwired into the human mind by evolution. Instead, he argues that language is a cultural invention—an adaptive, evolving tool shaped by the needs, values, and practices of human societies. This argument challenges linguistic nativism, particularly the view popularised by Noam Chomsky, who revived Plato's ancient dilemma to support the theory of universal grammar. Plato's Problem, as formulated in modern linguistics, asks: how can people know so much from so little experience? Plato originally posed this puzzle in the 'Meno', suggesting that learning is really the recollection of prior knowledge the soul had before birth. Chomsky adapted this idea in the twentieth century to argue that children acquire language too quickly and uniformly for it to result from learning alone. Thus, there must be a biological structure—universal grammar—that makes this rapid learning possible. This notion has had enormous influence. Researchers have pointed to uniform stages of child language acquisition, the so-called 'critical period' before puberty, deep similarities across world languages, and genetic markers like FOXP2 as evidence of an innate linguistic faculty. Yet as Everett demonstrates, these claims often rely on circular logic or overinterpret the data. FOXP2, for example, is involved in general motor control, not exclusively language. Similarly, so-called 'language areas' in the brain, such as Broca's area, are also used in music, memory, and tool use, suggesting that the brain is flexible rather than functionally compartmentalised. Against this backdrop, Everett offers an alternative: language emerges from culture and cognition in interaction. It is not a pre-programmed capacity, but a tool developed in the same way as fire, agriculture, or writing. It spreads, mutates, and becomes more sophisticated through social learning, necessity, and innovation. Everett draws heavily from his decades of fieldwork with the Pirahã people of the Amazon. Their language lacks feature common to many others: no numbers, no colour terms, no creation myths, no fixed kinship categories. These absences once puzzled linguists. But Everett argues they reveal a deeper cultural logic—one that values immediate experience, direct observation, and practical communication over abstraction. Pirahã culture shapes what is said, how it is said, and whether it is worth saying at all. This perspective reframes the discussion. Rather than looking for a genetic blueprint of language, Everett invites

us to see language as a social adaptation. Humans, he says, are 'tool-using animals', and language is among their most important tools—not because it emerges from specialised DNA, but because it solves a critical problem: how to coordinate complex activity in large, cooperative groups. Like bows, boats, or bread-making, language is invented, passed down, and shaped by trial, error, and imitation. Plato's Problem, then, does not require an appeal to the metaphysical or the genetic. Humans can learn a great deal from little input because they share brains shaped by similar problems, cultures shaped by similar social needs, and the capacity for symbolic representation. A child raised in a society that values storytelling will develop a rich narrative ability; a child raised where survival depends on gesture and silence will adapt accordingly. Language reflects these conditions—it does not precede them. Everett's challenge to linguistic nativism has sparked controversy, but it also opens a new path. If language is a cultural tool, then its study must include anthropology, psychology, history, and philosophy—not just neurology or syntax. It demands that we ask how language adapts to the structures of belief, ritual, and daily life, and how those structures in turn evolve as language evolves. Plato's legacy endures, not because his solution was final, but because the question remains urgent. How do people come to know and speak of what they have never seen? Everett's answer is grounded not in metaphysics but in mud, music, and memory. Humans invent meaning by living together, facing problems, and learning to share solutions. Language, in this view, is not a miracle of biology but a triumph of culture.

Cultural effects on grammar

Herbert Simon once remarked that complexity lies not in the object itself but in the description, we choose to give it. This insight proves especially true when thinking about language. Grammar, often treated as a rigid system of rules and structures, is in fact deeply intertwined with culture. Its form evolves not in isolation but in response to the lived experience of its users. 'Language: The Cultural Tool' offers a compelling case for understanding grammar not as a universal blueprint, but as a flexible adaptation to cultural needs and environmental constraints. A striking example of how culture and grammar intersect is the development of the Cherokee syllabary by Sequoyah in the early 19th century. Unlike alphabets that break down words into individual sounds, Sequoyah's syllabary was composed of symbols that each represented entire syllables. This system suited the Cherokee language structure and enabled literacy to spread rapidly among Cherokee speakers. The choice of script was not accidental; it reflected a cultural context where efficient memorisation and practical communication were paramount. While eventually replaced by an alphabetic system to bridge communication with English, the syllabary stands as a reminder that language tools are built in response to local pressures. Writing, once introduced, does more than record speech—it transforms it. Literacy allows thought to become externalised, structured, and revisited. Where speech fades as soon as it is spoken, writing endures, inviting reflection. It enables more complex expressions, greater precision, and abstraction. This shift in medium has grammatical consequences. In oral societies, where environmental noise and the absence of a written record create the risk of misunderstanding, redundancy becomes essential. A single idea may be repeated multiple times to ensure it is heard, remembered, and understood. But in written societies, repetition often gives way to economy, and language becomes denser, more tightly structured, and more hierarchical in syntax. Among the Pirahã people of the Amazon, Everett found a language shaped by a very different set of pressures. Their culture emphasises the here-and-now—the principle of immediacy of experience. In Pirahã, statements must be grounded in direct evidence: what has been seen, heard, or inferred firsthand. This cultural value has far-reaching effects on grammar. Notably, Pirahã appears to lack sentential recursion—the ability to embed

one clause inside another. Rather than say 'John thinks that Mary believes that the moon is made of cheese', the Pirahã would break it down into successive statements, such as 'John spoke. Mary said the moon is made of cheese'. The language avoids the stacking of ideas and favours sequences grounded in reality. This is not a lack of complexity, but a different form of it—one better aligned with the Pirahãs' worldview.

Cognitive recursion

Interestingly, recursion may still appear in Pirahã storytelling, not at the sentence level but through layered narrative structures. A story may unfold with nested events and shifting perspectives, showing that cognitive recursion—the ability to think recursively—is still present. The culture resists recursion in speech but not in thought, showing how cultural values can filter what kinds of linguistic expressions are considered useful or acceptable. Grammar, then, is not a one-size-fits-all system. Its features reflect the tasks it must perform. In societies where abstract planning and record-keeping are essential, grammar may grow more layered and hierarchical. In cultures oriented toward immediacy, grammar simplifies and foregrounds clarity and relevance. For instance, while some languages evolve elaborate case systems to track roles in complex sentences, others reduce these distinctions, relying on context or word order instead. Each system emerges from a balance of needs, shaped by the social and cognitive habits of its speakers. This view challenges the idea that recursion or any other grammatical trait is a universal hallmark of human language. If a language can function without recursion, then recursion may not be a necessary feature of grammar. It may be one strategy among many, employed where useful and omitted where not. This does not mean that Pirahã speakers are cognitively limited—only that their language has evolved to reflect their culture's values and priorities. The ability to use tools flexibly is, after all, one of humanity's defining traits. Everett's broader argument is that language itself is a tool, no different in essence from the bow and arrow or the canoe. Tools arise to solve problems; they are passed down, adapted, and sometimes abandoned when better solutions emerge. Language must be understood in this light—as an invention honed by human communities to meet the challenges they face. Grammar is not fixed in stone, but moulded like clay, its form dependent on the hands that shape it. Ultimately, language diversity is not a problem to be solved but a resource to be preserved. Each language offers insight into how different groups have met the challenges of life. The structures of grammar—whether recursive or not—reflect a conversation between culture and cognition, between environment and imagination. Just as there is no universal tool for every task, there is no universal grammar for every culture. The Pirahãs' grammar may be unfamiliar, even disorienting, to outsiders. But it is a grammar of happiness, shaped by a way of life rooted in the present. In this sense, the structure of a language is less a mirror of human nature than a record of what a community has found worth expressing.

How language began?

Language did not start with a word. It started with a conversation. In 'How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention[195]', Daniel Everett argues that language began with Homo erectus, who created culturally invented symbols. Over 60,000 generations, humans combined gestures, vocal tones, and motor control to form speech. Challenging the importance of grammar and storytelling, Everett emphasises social and neurological complexity as key to language's evolution and humanity's rise above other species despite physical

[195] Everett, D. (2017) How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention. London: Profile Books.

vulnerability. In 1991, deep in the Brazilian Amazon along the Kitiá River, Daniel Everett sat beside two Banawá men, adjusting headsets and fiddling with microphones. The men—Sabatão and Bidu—normally would have been hunting in the jungle with their blowguns and darts, but that day, their mission was different: they were going to talk. Everett's goal was to capture natural, spontaneous dialogue—something precious and rare in field linguistics, where the presence of a microphone often stiffens speech into performance. But that day was different. The two men began simply, in Banawá: 'Let's talk today'. 'Yes. Daniel likes our language very much'. 'Yes, I know'. 'I will talk. Then you can tell a story about the jaguar'. 'Yes'. What followed was an hour of storytelling, reminiscing, and agreement. For Everett, it was a moment of revelation—not just linguistically, but anthropologically and philosophically. These men were not simply speaking; they were doing what humans do best: building meaning together. Conversation like this illustrates what language truly is. It is not a code to be cracked or a dictionary to be memorised. It is a social act—a tool created and adapted for human cooperation. In this light, language did not begin with nouns or verbs or even the famed 'first word'. It began when one hominin looked another in the eye and made an intentional sound, and the other responded. This call and response, this feedback loop, this shared focus—that was the beginning. Human language is grounded not in words alone, but in shared context. In that jungle exchange, they signalled not just what language to use, but also a promise to avoid Portuguese and commit to Banawá, for the benefit of Everett and for the pride of the speakers. When one said, 'Let's remember how things were a long time ago', no additional context was needed. The past they referenced was a shared one. That is how all language works: much of it is unstated, existing in a realm of implied meaning shaped by culture, memory, and mutual experience. So where did this ability come from? Language likely began with 'Homo erectus', over a million years ago. These ancestors made tools, travelled vast distances, and worked in groups—behaviours that suggest the presence of symbolic thinking and some form of early communication. Over generations, pointing became miming, miming became vocalising, and vocalising became speaking. The trajectory was not linear or smooth. It was shaped by environment, necessity, innovation, and social bonds. Unlike birdsong or primate calls, human language is built on arbitrary symbols. A word like 'tree' has no natural connection to the object it refers to. That arbitrariness is what makes human language flexible. It allows us to discuss not only what is present, but what is absent—what was, what might be, and even what never could be. Language turned humans into time travellers and mind readers. It let us share not just tools but ideas, and not just ideas but dreams. Everett's fieldwork reveals something else: how fragile this invention is. The Banawá language has fewer than a hundred speakers. If they vanished tomorrow, they would leave behind almost no material trace—no cities, no monuments, no written texts. Would archaeologists of the future recognise them as linguistic beings? Probably not. And yet, their ability to reflect, joke, recall, and plan—these are all feats of linguistic genius. The loss of any language is the loss of a worldview. When a language dies, a whole map of how to be human vanishes with it. The Banawá, like so many Indigenous peoples, remind us that language is not about technological complexity. It is about the richness of human connection. The simplest exchanges often carry the deepest meaning. Everett concludes that language did not fall from the heavens, nor did it erupt from a single gene. It grew with us, in us, and between us. It emerged not from logic but from love, not from design but from need. Not with the Word, but with the Conversation.

A kingdom of speech

Language did not emerge fully formed, nor was it the product of a sudden divine spark. It evolved, slowly and cooperatively, shaped by the minds and cultures of early humans. 'How

Language Began' shows that in the heart of this development lies the symbol—a socially agreed-upon link between a sound or gesture and a meaning. Symbols are not natural objects; they reflect cultural consensus. A serpent might represent danger, not because of biology alone, but because generations agreed it should. This shared meaning became the groundwork for language. Daniel Everett emphasises that language is far more than strings of words. It is a cultural system—embodied, interactive, and constantly evolving. In early human groups, communication was likely a full-body experience: gestures, tone, rhythm, and posture worked together with vocal sounds to express intent and emotion. Over time, these signals grew more abstract. They were broken down into discrete, combinable units—first into syllables, then phonemes—allowing infinite combinations and expressions. This transition is what linguists call 'duality of patterning', where meaningless sounds like 'k' or 'a' combine into meaningful words like 'cat'. From there, grammar emerged—not as a set of rules imposed from above, but as an adaptive structure shaped by daily use. Simple grammars began as linear constructions—short, unconnected expressions. Later, humans developed hierarchical systems that embedded meaning within larger structures. The most complex grammars became recursive, allowing phrases to contain versions of themselves, as in: 'The man who said the boy who ran was tired is lying'. Everett identifies three main types of grammar in human languages. G1 grammars are simple and flat, like a string of words without internal organisation. G2 grammars introduce hierarchy, where phrases are nested within others. G3 grammars are fully recursive, capable of infinite depth and flexibility. This development was cultural, not biological—it did not depend on a sudden brain mutation but on the shared efforts of communities to communicate more effectively. Culture and language shaped one another. As early humans began to live in larger groups, they needed more refined ways to express intentions, delegate roles, and coordinate actions. The invention of grammar allowed humans to share more than needs or threats—it made it possible to pass on memories, stories, strategies, and beliefs. Language became not only a way to survive but a way to be human. This achievement was not unique to modern Homo sapiens. It began with Homo erectus, who spoke in ways that structured their social worlds and laid the groundwork for everything that followed. They gave rise to the most powerful tool humans would ever wield—not fire or metal or machines, but speech itself. They did not invent a language. They built a kingdom of speech.

Third Chapter: SPEAKING

1. HOMO LOQUENS

1.1. Talking

(The speaking animal: Evolution, abstraction, and Homo Loquens)

'Speech turned individuals into collaborative beings by weaving social bonds larger than any tribe'.

— Dan Everett, Language: The Cultural Tool

'With speech, humans stepped into abstraction—into worlds built of stories, myths, and imagined futures'.

Dunbar's hypothesis

In the search for the evolutionary roots of language, one of the most compelling theories belongs to anthropologist Robin Dunbar. His 1993 paper, 'Co-Evolution of Neocortex Size, Group Size and Language in Humans[196]', proposes that language developed as a more efficient substitute for grooming—a key behaviour used by primates to maintain social bonds. Among chimpanzees, up to 43% of time is spent grooming, a tactile way to reinforce alliances and group cohesion. But as human group sizes grew beyond what could be maintained through physical contact alone, speech emerged as a kind of vocal grooming. It allowed individuals to maintain social bonds with multiple people at once, while also freeing up time and attention for other survival tasks. Dunbar suggests that the increase in human brain size, especially in the neocortex, made this transition possible. As groups expanded, the cognitive demands of keeping track of relationships required new tools—language was the innovation that met this demand. Unlike grooming, which is one-to-one and time-consuming, language enabled multi-party interaction. It turned social maintenance into something scalable, efficient, and mobile. Talking replaced touching, and humans began to share not only affection, but stories, rules, plans, and myths. Yet language did not emerge solely from the need to bond. Dunbar's model intersects with more cognitive theories, particularly those emphasising recursion. Recursion—the ability to embed structures within structures—allowed humans to nest ideas, build grammar, and expand meaning. Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch argued that recursion marked a leap from finite animal signalling systems to the open-ended infinity of human language. With recursion, humans could organise thoughts in sequences, apply logic, construct poetry, and speculate about the future. This ability depended not just on mental agility, but on the repurposing of existing neural circuits. Early humans co-opted perceptual and motor capacities for linguistic use. These adaptations, honed by selection, became so optimised for language that they lost their original non-linguistic functions. The brain became leaner but more specialised. Interestingly, this coincided with a reduction in overall brain volume during the Holocene. Smaller brains, paradoxically, became more efficient—supporting speech with less energy and material. A crucial moment came roughly 30,000 years ago, when language transformed from a practical tool into an abstract, recursive system. With this shift came syntax, adverbs, and the cognitive scaffolding for mathematics, philosophy, and law. Language began shaping the human mind, not just reflecting it. The world became increasingly structured by stories, agreements, rules, and symbolic reference. Dunbar's theory, when placed in dialogue with research on neural specialisation and recursion, suggests that language is not merely a byproduct of intelligence, but a selected trait—one that reshaped social organisation, cognition, and biology. From grooming to grammar, the evolution of Homo loquens reflects a transition from tactile immediacy to abstract coordination, from touch to thought.

Homo Loquens

Humans are often described not just as Homo sapiens—the wise ape—but as Homo loquens, the speaking animal. Language, in this view, is not merely a tool for communication but the defining act of being human. While many animals produce sounds or gestures to signal threats or needs, their communicative systems are limited in scope, incapable of novelty, syntax,

[196] Dunbar, R. I. M. (1993) Co-Evolution of Neocortex Size, Grouping Size and Language in Humans, Behavioural and Brain Sciences.

or abstraction. In contrast, human speech exhibits nearly limitless flexibility, with no exhaustive inventory of possible utterances. Each spoken sentence may be new, unrepeatable, and laden with nuances shaped by context, intent, and social relation. Ernst Pulgram, in 'Homo Loquens: An Ethological View[197]', argues that while animal signals are emotionally triggered responses tied to environmental stimuli, human speech is symbolic, conceptual, and intentional, arising from a singular neurological capacity that no other species possesses. This capacity, however, is not embedded in a specific organ, like a bird's syrinx or a cat's tail. Speech is a behavioural phenomenon—an emergent use of lungs, diaphragm, vocal cords, tongue, and lips. These were not evolutionarily selected for language but adapted through an intricate interplay of necessity and imagination. Pulgram frames this ability within the broader context of ethology, the study of instinctive behaviour. Just as birds build nests without instruction and spiders weave webs without being taught, so too do human infants, exposed to language, absorb its structure effortlessly. The apparent spontaneity of this process suggests an inherited biological predisposition—an instinctive hunger for speech. Ethological thought contrasts sharply with behaviourist traditions, which see language as a set of conditioned responses to stimuli. Behaviourists, focusing on observable action, dismiss internal mental states as speculative. But the instinct to speak, like the instinct to bond, explore, or grieve, resists reduction to mechanical repetition. The extraordinary speed and fluency with which children acquire language, without formal instruction, supports the view that speech is not wholly learnt but unfolds from within. Nonetheless, the instinct for speech has its window. Children acquire language naturally; adults must work at it. The critical period for effortless language learning appears to close with age, leaving later learners reliant on reason and reflection. The same adaptive brilliance that enables humans to speak also allows them to build languages, change them, manipulate them—but only if their environment awakens the instinct early. As Pulgram notes, the early emergence of speech reflects a design tuned for sociocultural integration. Humans are not simply thinkers who happen to speak, but social animals who learn to think through speech. Language acquisition, then, reveals a dual nature: it is both instinct and artifice. It emerges from a biologically prepared mind but is shaped by culture, community, and time. Understanding humans as Homo loquens requires acknowledging not just that people speak, but that speech itself speaks them into being. It is not merely a mirror of thought but the furnace where thought is forged.

Speaking Man

The story of Homo sapiens is, in many ways, the story of speech. In 'The Making, the Rise, and the Future of the Speaking Man[198]', by Dan M. Mrejeru, the evolutionary emergence of language is not treated as a late cultural development but as a defining threshold that reorganised the human brain and rewired human life. The 'speaking man' is not simply the one who talks, but the one who became something new through the act of speaking—a different kind of species, shaped as much by words as by tools or bones. The journey toward 'Speaking Man' began long before syntax or grammar. It began with climate. Around seven million years ago, falling CO_2 levels transformed African forests into savannas. This change forced early primates onto open ground, where bipedalism emerged as a solution for mobility and visibility. Walking upright freed the hands—not just for carrying tools but for gesturing, perhaps even mimicking sound. In this new posture, the lungs, diaphragm, and vocal apparatus could begin their long reconfiguration. A body prepared itself for a mind it had not yet evolved. With hands

[197] Pulgram, E. (1975) Homo Loquens: An Ethological View. Harvard University Press.
[198] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) The Making, the Rise, and the Future of the Speaking Man. București: Integral.

available and attention shifting to cooperation, tool use appeared. The 'Oldowan' and 'Acheulean' stone technologies were not just material advancements—they demanded planning, imitation, and transmission. These acts required a scaffolding of shared understanding. Long before abstract language emerged, there were forms of communication rooted in rhythm, mimicry, and motor memory. Tools were not just objects; they were symbols—fossilised actions carrying intention. What followed was not linear. Brain growth accelerated, but the organisation of that brain remained apelike well into the age of Homo erectus. Still, something changed. Around 500,000 years ago, geomagnetic anomalies may have triggered bursts of neurogenesis, possibly by increasing atmospheric carbon-14 and reactive oxidative species. These events, though speculative, align eerily well with bursts of innovation: fire use, collaborative hunting, perhaps even proto-symbolic behaviour. The brain began to reshape itself in ways no skull alone could show. By 200,000 years ago, Homo sapiens had emerged—anatomically modern but not yet fully symbolic. The leap came later. Between 100,000 and 30,000 years ago, brain architecture shifted again. Globularity increased. Frontal-parietal asymmetry—the so-called Yakovlevian torque—intensified. The brain was no longer just larger; it was differently shaped. This new shape allowed for complex memory, narrative thought, and linguistic recursion. Speech did not just evolve—it reorganised the internal space of the mind. The archaeological record confirms this. Burials, ornaments, pigments, and tools show a mind increasingly obsessed with meaning. Symbolic culture bloomed. The speaking man was not simply surviving but imagining—marking territory, mourning the dead, mythologising existence. In Mrejeru's view, the speaking man is not a fixed identity but a phase of transformation. Speech changed the brain, the brain changed the environment, and the environment fed back into the evolution of speech. This feedback loop made us not only social but historical. Speaking became the foundation of civilisation, of memory, of future-making.

We have turned into new species

The transformation from tool-using hominids to language-bearing humans is not merely a cultural leap but a biological shift of profound depth. In 'How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens[199]'(2020), Dan M. Mrejeru argues that the emergence of language introduced a new cognitive layer—one that rerouted perception, distorted attention, and slowly altered the structure of the human brain. Language, far from being a neutral tool for sharing information, became a secondary task overlaid on perception, subtly undermining direct sensory awareness and reshaping human reality. Some studies in cognitive science show that even passive listening reduces cortical efficiency during visual tasks. The brain, when parsing speech, pulls attention away from other stimuli. Language interferes with the world rather than simply describing it. This interference is not a defect, but an adaptation. As language imposed new demands on attention, humans compensated by withdrawing from wild environments, building shelters, tools, and stable communities. Language helped people endure abstraction by minimising external threat. Visual studies on saccades and gaze tracking reveal how perception is built not as an objective stream but as a filtered continuity, structured by delay and inference. Language, layered over this delay, magnifies the distortion, allowing humans to construct a linear, symbol-driven world. This latency—around 190 milliseconds—shapes perception itself. What is not seen clearly is named. What is named becomes seen. Through speech, humans began to reprogram their senses toward meaning rather than presence. Mrejeru explores the striking correlation between the growth of linguistic complexity and the physical reduction in

[199] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens. București: Integral.

brain size. Craniometric data show a sharp drop in cranial capacity during the Holocene, roughly the last 10,000 years. Male skull volume decreased by about 10%, female by nearly 18%. Yet this decline in size did not reduce symbolic ability. On the contrary, it coincided with more advanced language and more efficient neural systems. As entropy decreased in the brain—less neural 'noise', more precision—language became the dominant system of ordering thought. Smaller brains, shaped by energy-saving adaptations, proved sufficient for the demands of speech-based societies. What emerges is a hypothesis of augmentation by reduction. Language did not increase raw computational power but refined its direction. It introduced new constraints—latency, abstraction, detachment—but also new affordances: memory, planning, and symbolic exchange. This transformation was not merely cultural or intellectual. It altered the species. Homo loquens is not a variant of Homo sapiens but a descendent, carrying in its neural architecture the quiet cost of speech. The evolution of language was not without trade-offs. As humans gained access to shared symbolic worlds, they lost immediacy. Perception became mediated, and the self, increasingly defined through linguistic structure, began to live at one remove from its environment. Yet it is through this remove—through speech—that humans learnt to dwell not only in space, but in time, memory, and meaning.

Man as a talking animal

The phrase Homo sapiens, meaning 'wise man', has long served as humanity's self-assigned title, but perhaps Homo loquens—the talking human—would be more accurate. Dennis Fry, in his book 'Homo Loquens: Man as a Talking Animal[200]', argues that what truly distinguishes humans from other species is not intellect alone, but the capacity for speech. Language is not merely an adornment of thought; it is its very architecture, shaping how people perceive the world, connect with others, and organise their inner lives. Human physiology closely resembles that of many animals, yet humans alone have turned vocalisation into a flexible, generative system. While rats may exhibit neurosis, and chimps can use symbolic gestures, no other species creates complex narratives, philosophies, or jokes. What sets humans apart is the conceptual leap—the ability to name, define, and manipulate the world symbolically. The word 'tree' does not merely point to a leafy object; it evokes ideas, categories, and even memories. In this way, language builds a bridge between abstract thought and the material world. Crucially, speech is acquired with astonishing ease by young children. From cries to coos, babble to words, most children master the fundamentals of their native language before the age of five. This process unfolds through a combination of imitation, neurological readiness, and social motivation. Early vocalisations like 'mama' or 'dada' are not just sounds; they are attempts to map internal recognition onto shared expression. Recognition always comes before production—children understand long before they speak, and their first utterances reveal a trial-and-error refinement of sound, rhythm, and meaning. The phoneme system—those basic sound units like /m/, /d/, and /n/—develops gradually. As a child's vocabulary grows, so does their ability to distinguish and reproduce finer acoustic contrasts. Similarly, grammar emerges not through rote teaching but through the child's own creative synthesis. When a toddler says 'All-gone milk', they are already building syntax, even without formal instruction. Overgeneralisations like 'bringed' or 'mouses' are not mistakes but signs of an intuitive grasp of linguistic rules. Beyond cognitive structure, language also binds humans into communities. Speech serves not just to inform but to comfort, negotiate, assert, and perform. Greetings, small talk, and polite exchanges may seem superficial, but they serve as vital social rituals, echoing the grooming behaviours seen in primates. In Fry's words, language is the lifeblood of society—

[200] Fry, D. (1977) Homo Loquens: Man as a Talking Animal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

without it, the human group as it exists would be unthinkable. Yet, for all its gifts, language is also a source of misunderstanding and manipulation. People rarely reflect on the mechanisms of speech. Just as one breathes without understanding oxygen exchange, so most speak without knowing how sounds are formed or meanings shaped. The power of language can be used to elevate or deceive, to build or divide. The very abstraction that makes speech so powerful also makes it dangerous—ideas can be distorted, repeated, and weaponised. The miracle of speech lies in its ordinariness. Everyone uses it, yet few grasp its full mystery. From the first infant cry to the most sophisticated conversation, language remains the defining feature of Homo loquens—not simply the 'wise man', but the talking one.

Rising of the speaking man

The evolution of the human brain did not unfold in a slow, linear fashion. Instead, it occurred in waves—sudden, accelerated phases of neurodevelopment catalysed by environmental forces and internal adaptations. In 'The Hypothesis of Homo loquens[201]', Dan M. Mrejeru presents a compelling argument that the transition from Homo sapiens to Homo loquens—the speaking human—was driven not only by genetic drift and cultural innovation but also by a series of geomagnetic events that intensified oxidative processes, triggering bursts of neurogenesis and the emergence of new cerebral functions. Roughly 80,000 to 43,000 years ago, geomagnetic disturbances such as the Norwegian-Greenland Sea and Laschamp excursions led to significant increases in atmospheric carbon-14. This radiative change did not harm the species—it enhanced it. Contrary to the common association of radiation with damage, low-dose ionising radiation stimulated the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), which in moderate amounts functioned as essential signalling agents. These ROS helped generate new neurons in brain regions tied to memory, pattern recognition, and abstraction, particularly in the hippocampus and the developing frontoparietal network. This biological surge laid the foundation for what Mrejeru calls a 'language-ready' brain. As new neural connections formed and circuits complexified, cognition moved beyond instinct and survival. The brain began constructing internal models, abstracting from perception, and projecting imagined outcomes. These were the seeds of language—not just sound production, but structured, recursive, and symbolic communication. The globularisation of the skull, particularly evident in the precuneus and thalamus, corresponds to this reorganisation. These regions became hubs for consciousness, self-awareness, and verbal composition. Between 43,000 and 30,000 years ago, language entered a second phase. The rise of verbs and adverbs allowed humans to describe not only objects but actions, sequences, and causality. This reshaped the mental landscape. Thought became motion; stories could unfold across time. The frontoparietal synthesis—the ability to combine elements into coherent new expressions—emerged, making possible not just communication, but imagination, planning, and moral reasoning. Language was no longer merely a function of the brain; it was shaping the brain. These neurological developments were accompanied by perceptual shifts. As language became dominant, visual processing slowed. Humans gained the ability to fixate longer on specific details, increasing saccadic latency to enhance cognitive resolution. This enabled deeper analysis but also reduced contextual awareness. People became more capable of abstraction, but more vulnerable to fragmentation. Language carved the world into categories, but sometimes at the cost of unity. Cognition evolved in waves, each initiated by internal and environmental disruptions. The first wave introduced static language—nouns and adjectives—allowing humans to name and describe.

[201] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) The Hypothesis of Homo loquens: A Radically Revised Perspective. Bucharest: Independent Multidisciplinary Research.

The second added verbs and syntax, turning language dynamic and predictive. The third, beginning in the Neolithic and accelerating through the technological revolutions, expanded symbolic systems, culminating in exponential growth in knowledge—and, paradoxically, in a crisis of meaning. As humans built ever more complex societies, the foundational role of language became both a strength and a vulnerability. The same systems that enabled cooperation and culture also made people reliant on abstraction, prone to detachment from their surroundings, and susceptible to losing touch with the contextual, sensory richness of earlier cognition. In this sense, the rise of the speaking man was also the rise of internal complexity—a movement toward the artificial, the planned, and the imagined. The transformation into Homo loquens was not inevitable. It was the outcome of evolutionary chance and environmental influence, of biological plasticity meeting cosmic rhythms. But once this convergence occurred, it opened a path unlike any other in evolutionary history: the capacity not only to describe the world but to remake it through language.

Short history of speaking

Languages are not just tools for communication—they are mirrors of history, shaped by the rise and fall of empires, the carving of river valleys, and the forging of nations. In 'Speak: A Short History of Languages[202]', Tore Janson traces how languages emerged, spread, splintered, and solidified over millennia. He begins not with spoken language's mysterious birth, but with writing—when language began to leave its lasting mark. Writing developed in places where agriculture flourished, and people settled—particularly in fertile river valleys like those of the Euphrates, Tigris, and Nile. In these cradles of civilisation, people built irrigation systems and grew crops in cooperative societies. But managing water, labour, and surplus food required coordination, which in turn demanded a new kind of memory: written records. The Sumerians of Mesopotamia invented cuneiform—wedge-shaped marks impressed into clay tablets—over 5,000 years ago. This writing system, although born in one culture, was so functional that it survived for over three millennia and was adopted by many different languages. Even after spoken Sumerian had vanished, scribes continued to learn and use it, preserving not only language but cultural continuity across centuries. In Egypt, writing emerged soon after, in the form of hieroglyphs. Far from simple pictures, these symbols combined sounds, meanings, and aesthetic flourishes. They were laborious to learn and read, restricting literacy to a tiny elite of scribes. Yet they gave the Egyptian state the power to organise immense public projects, such as the construction of pyramids and the collection of taxes, across vast distances and over centuries. Janson shows that writing often outlived the languages it recorded. Spoken Egyptian evolved over time, while the written form remained conservative. This created a widening gap between how people spoke and how they wrote—a tension still visible today in many modern languages. Later, the focus shifts from empires to nations. As medieval Europe began to consolidate politically, language became a tool of statecraft. Monarchs and reformers promoted vernacular languages—like English, French, or German—as symbols of sovereignty and cultural pride. In the 15th century, when England's Henry V chose to write official letters in English rather than French, he was not only making a personal choice but laying groundwork for national identity. Education and literature played crucial roles. As printing spread, so did standardised grammars, dictionaries, and textbooks, creating what we now call 'national languages'. Writers like Dante, Chaucer, and Cervantes helped mold these tongues into vehicles of high culture. The Church, once the guardian of Latin, gradually ceded ground to local languages in both liturgy and learning. Janson's narrative reminds us that language is not

[202] Janson, T. (2002) Speak: A Short History of Languages, Oxford University Press.

fixed—it responds to power, culture, and necessity. Whether forged under colonial rule, shaped by resistance, or crafted to unify a people, every language tells a story far beyond words.

Written speech

Language begins with sound. For most of human history, people spoke but did not write. Speech came naturally; it was learnt in childhood, passed from mouth to ear without rules carved in stone. Writing, by contrast, had to be invented—and for many cultures, it never was. In 'Speak: A Short History of Languages', Tore Janson explores how speech becomes script and how writing, in turn, reshapes the way people speak and think. In southern Africa, the Sotho languages tell this story with unusual clarity. Before colonial interference, there were many local groups—Kwena, Ngwato, Pedi—each with its own identity, but all speaking variations of a mutually intelligible Bantu language. There was no fixed label like 'Sotho;' people spoke the language of their state, which bore the name of its ruling clan. These distinctions were fluid and functional, suited to a world where writing had no role in preserving language or asserting identity. The arrival of European missionaries in the 19th century changed everything. Suddenly, oral languages had to be written down. And to be written, they needed names. The missionaries—Scottish, French, and German—each created their own orthographies and translated religious texts into the spoken varieties they encountered. These efforts eventually crystallised into Setswana, Sesotho, and Sepedi: three written languages drawn from a continuous linguistic field. Writing fixed them, giving them form and boundaries that had not existed before. But the power of writing extends beyond preservation. Once a language is written, it gains legitimacy. It becomes teachable, examinable, and administrable. When colonial governments established schools, they adopted the missionary-written versions of the Sotho languages. These written forms began to influence the way people spoke—especially in formal or public settings—nudging local dialects toward a national 'standard'. This process accelerated after independence. Botswana and Lesotho adopted Setswana and Sesotho, respectively, as national languages—essential tools of state-building and identity formation. Children learnt to read and write in these tongues, and the gap between spoken and written forms narrowed. What had once been flexible oral systems were now codified languages, complete with grammars and dictionaries. Janson argues that writing does not just record language; it changes it. It slows down the natural evolution of speech, introduces conscious reflection on usage, and fosters the idea of a 'correct' form. Spoken language continues to shift with time and context, but written language tends to resist change, creating tension between everyday usage and official norms. Thus, the story of Sotho languages illustrates a broader truth: writing may come late, but once it arrives, it reshapes everything. It names, defines, standardises—and in doing so, it constructs the very idea of a language.

Drama of speaking

Language learners often focus on words and grammar, yet most of human communication happens without them. Non-verbal cues—gestures, facial expressions, tone, and posture—shape the way messages are sent and received. These elements are not just supplementary; they are fundamental to authentic interaction. Carola Surkamp, in her article 'Non-Verbal Communication: Why We Need It in Foreign Language Teaching and How We Can Foster It with Drama Activities[203]', argues that teaching foreign languages without integrating non-verbal

[203] Surkamp, C. (2014) 'Non-Verbal Communication: Why We Need It in Foreign Language Teaching and How We Can Foster It with Drama Activities', in Scenario: A Journal of Performative Teaching, Learning, Research.

communication is like training a singer to read music but not to perform. Spoken language is always accompanied by physical expression. People do not just speak—they raise their eyebrows, lean in, hesitate, wave. According to some estimates, non-verbal behaviour can account for more than half of communicative meaning. Yet language classrooms often prioritise spoken vocabulary and grammatical precision over embodied expression. The result is students who can form sentences but struggle to navigate real conversations, where intonation, pauses, and gestures often carry more meaning than the words themselves. Surkamp emphasises that non-verbal communication plays multiple roles. It conveys emotions, regulates turn-taking, signals relationships, and illustrates meaning. Some gestures are culturally specific, like a nod for 'yes' or a hand wave for 'hello', while others are more intuitive but equally powerful. A shrug can indicate uncertainty, a stiff posture discomfort. When learners misunderstand these cues—or fail to notice them at all—miscommunication is likely. One way to address this gap is through drama-based pedagogy. Drama exercises invite students to experiment with body language in a structured way. Activities like mirroring, walking with intention, and acting out emotions develop awareness of how posture, facial expression, and movement communicate meaning. Students become more conscious of their own gestures and more attuned to others, building confidence and fluency even before they master the language itself. Drama also encourages emotional engagement. Students are less inhibited when they play roles, and more willing to express themselves physically. These embodied experiences help reinforce memory, improve pronunciation, and foster intercultural sensitivity. In literature, too, non-verbal aspects of dialogue—how characters stand, glance, or speak—reveal subtext and deepen interpretation. Drama brings such texts to life, transforming reading into performance. The intercultural dimension is especially crucial. Different cultures use non-verbal cues in very different ways. Direct eye contact may signal honesty in one place and disrespect in another. A gesture of approval in one context might offend elsewhere. Helping learners navigate these differences can prevent misunderstandings and build empathy. Surkamp proposes that learners explore these variations not as right or wrong but as signs of cultural diversity. Ultimately, integrating non-verbal communication into language teaching makes the learning process more human. It connects students not just to words, but to moods, intentions, and relationships. If communication is a dance between people, then body language is its rhythm.

1.2. Speaking into the air

(Lost in transmission: Speech, solitude, and the collapse of response)

'True speech accepts risk—misunderstanding, non-response, and the dignity of the other…To speak genuinely is to offer oneself into the unknown, relinquishing domination in favour of presence'.

— John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air

Speaking into the air

In 'Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication[204]', John Durham Peters offers a striking reinterpretation of communication, dismantling the modern assumption that it is—or should be—a transparent bridge between minds. Peters instead exposes the deep-

[204] Peters, J.D. (1999). Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication. University of Chicago Press.

rooted tensions, misunderstandings, and metaphysical yearnings that have long haunted our efforts to truly connect. The dream of perfect mutual understanding, so often held up as the goal of communication, is revealed as a fantasy, if not a dangerous one. Communication, he argues, is not the resolution of distance between souls but the drama of its persistence. Peters traces how this longing for communion has shaped theological, philosophical, and technological discourses. From Plato and Augustine to Heidegger and McLuhan, he shows that communication has always been more than the simple transmission of messages—it has been a spiritual ambition, a secularised version of the Christian ideal of communion. Speaking becomes not merely a technical act but a symbolic gesture toward the impossible: the complete sharing of one's inner self. This aspiration, Peters argues, is bound to fail—not because of human error, but because of what communication is. People are not transparent to one another, nor to themselves. Language always intervenes, distorts, and refracts. He contrasts two models: communication as dialogue and communication as dissemination. The first is built on ideals of reciprocity, presence, and mutual understanding; the second on transmission, publicity, and the acceptance of asymmetry. Socrates and Buber exemplify the former, while Jesus, Kafka, and the radio operator stand for the latter. Peters leans toward dissemination—not because it guarantees understanding, but because it acknowledges the ethical dignity of the other as truly other. Rather than merging minds, true communication honours difference and allows space for silence, misinterpretation, and non-response. This reframing has profound implications. It challenges the popular faith that better technologies, clearer messages, or more empathy will solve the 'problem' of communication. Instead, Peters asks people to reflect on the communicative act itself as one of risk, exposure, and uncertainty. Speaking is never just transmitting information; it is venturing oneself into the unknown, knowing one might not be heard, let alone understood. The air into which one speaks is not a neutral medium but a metaphor for the irreducible space between people. This tension is especially visible in mass communication. Broadcasting, in Peters' view, is a form of address that does not presume a response. It resembles prayer more than dialogue. In fact, he argues that mass media inherit theological structures: the notion of an all-hearing, all-seeing audience echoes the omniscient God of Christian thought. Communication becomes an act of faith. The speaker believes in an addressee, though their presence remains unverifiable. The microphone or the page, like the pulpit, becomes a space of vulnerability.

Vulnerability of communication

The vulnerability is not a flaw but a defining feature of communication. The possibility of being misunderstood, ignored, or rejected is what makes any act of expression meaningful. For John Durham Peters, the ethics of communication lie in its acceptance of risk. Attempts to eliminate this risk—through surveillance, technical perfection, or ideological conformity—turn communication into control. The desire to always be understood becomes a will to dominate. Genuine communication, by contrast, involves letting go. It is an offering, not a conquest. The ethics of communication is also an ethics of distance and even deception. This also redefines the speaker's role. Rather than being a transmitter of truth, the speaker becomes a witness, a testifier, a figure who speaks not to inform but to disclose. Such a conception foregrounds speech as an existential act: it is not the content of what one says that matters most, but the courage to speak at all. Language becomes not a container of thoughts but a gesture of vulnerability. In this sense, every utterance is both a reaching out and a letting go. Peters' analysis resonates with the increasing complexity and impersonality of digital communication. In a world of constant connection, misunderstanding has not disappeared—it has multiplied. Online speech often floats unanchored, divorced from context and body, consumed by unknown

audiences. The fantasy of perfect transparency—so central to the digital promise—masks the deeper condition of isolation and fragmentation. Peter's work offers a sobering reminder: more communication does not mean more communion. His history, then, is not merely academic—it is philosophical, even theological. By tracing the failures, paradoxes, and metaphysical aspirations of communication, Peters invites a humbler, more ethical approach. He replaces the demand to be understood with a commitment to speak truthfully, to listen openly, and to accept the limits of language. In doing so, he offers not a cure for the failures of communication, but a way to live with them. Communication, for Peters, is not the solving of a puzzle but the staging of a drama. Its failures are not bugs in the system but essential conditions. True communication does not erase distance but honours it. It accepts that the other remains unknowable, that words always fall short, and that speaking is an act of faith. In a world obsessed with control, clarity, and connectivity, 'Speaking into the Air' reminds people that meaning does not arise from erasure of difference, but from the courage to speak despite it.

Homo informaticus

John Holgate's article 'Homo Loquens Meets Homo Informaticus: Exploring the Relationship between Language and Information[205]' points that in the digital age, human language no longer stands alone. It now coexists with a parallel system of meaning: information. Once defined narrowly through symbols or signals, information has become something much more pervasive, shaping cognition, communication, and culture itself. In this transformation, the classical figure of homo loquens, the speaking human, finds its reflection in 'homo informaticus', the human immersed in data and informational flow. John Holgate explores this shift through the lens of the Philosophy of Information, proposing that information behaves much like a language of its own. It has rules, syntax, and even moods, just as natural language does. This perspective bridges long-standing debates between linguistics and information theory, suggesting that the 'information turn' of the late 20th century grew directly out of the earlier 'linguistic turn' in philosophy. Where philosophers once treated meaning as a property of sentences or speech acts, information theory expanded that logic, redefining meaning as probability, entropy, or surprise. Still, the analogy between language and information is not always simple. Holgate cites Rafael Capurro's trilemma, which warns that treating information as either univocal, analogical, or equivocal across disciplines each comes with conceptual risks. Is an email really the same kind of information as DNA replication? Or is 'information' simply a placeholder for too many different ideas? Natural language, unlike code or data streams, is not reducible to units like bits or 'infons'. It is breath, gesture, mood, time, reference. A shrug, a pause, or a whispered word can carry more significance than a thousand data points. Philosophers like Wittgenstein and Grice already showed how meaning is embedded in human practices, not abstract tokens. Information, when stripped of context, becomes brittle. Language, by contrast, thrives in ambiguity and interpretation. And yet the boundaries blur. As information becomes the currency of power, language becomes increasingly entangled with metrics, algorithms, and quantifiable outputs. Grammar itself begins to resemble governance. Sentence structures impose hierarchy. Data analytics predict speech patterns. Our modes of expression are constrained by search engines and automated suggestions. Even silence becomes a kind of data point. The rise of 'homo informaticus' brings new paradoxes. Language, once a shared tool for reflection and communion, is now a performance monitored by unseen systems.

[205] Holgate, J.D. (2017). Homo Loquens Meets Homo Informaticus: Exploring the Relationship between Language and Information. Proceedings, 1(3), p.91. doi:https://doi.org/10.3390/is4si-2017-04067.

Every utterance—written or spoken—feeds back into the network, analysed and reprocessed. Holgate warns that this feedback loop risks transforming speech into simulation, intention into optimisation. But language is not so easily captured. It retains what Holgate calls 'quiescent centres'—the hidden, still places where new meanings can emerge. These are the lacunae of speech, the ellipses and unfinished sentences, the slips, and hesitations that no AI can fully decode. Here, human meaning resists flattening. Ultimately, the dialogue between homo loquens and homo informaticus is not a battle but a tension. Information brings efficiency, scalability, precision. Language brings resonance, irony, empathy. The future of human understanding lies not in choosing one over the other but in recognising how each reflects the other's limits. Language teaches that not everything meaningful can be quantified. Information reminds that not everything expressible is meaningful. The challenge is not to fuse them into a single system, but to preserve the space between them—where meaning unfolds.

Imaginary thinking

The capacity for imagination—the ability to construct internal worlds detached from immediate perception—stands at the heart of what makes humans unique. In 'How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens[206]', Dan M. Mrejeru traces the emergence of imaginary thinking back to its early form: magical thinking, a cognitive mode where cause and effect need no rational link. This way of thinking, far from irrational in its original context, allowed early humans to act on hope, fear, and intuition long before formal knowledge systems developed. As language began to evolve, it gave shape to this emerging inner world. Before fully articulated speech, humans likely relied on gesture and basic vocalisation, but as syntax and vocabulary developed, they enabled a finer structure for internal reflection and communication. Language did not simply record reality—it created new versions of it. Through the recursive power of language, humans could embed ideas within ideas, constructing conceptual layers far removed from the present moment. This allowed for memory, planning, metaphor, and, eventually, myth. Imaginary thinking is not passive fantasy. It is a tool for adaptation. Early symbolic artefacts—burial rites, cave paintings, carved figurines—demonstrate that imagination shaped survival. These objects record how humans began to use fragmented memories and perceptions to build internal models of the world. By analysing and recombining past experiences, people could simulate the future, experiment with decisions, and refine emotional and social responses before acting. Imagination was not escape—it was preparation. Modern neuroscience suggests a biological basis for this shift. Neurogenesis, particularly in the hippocampus, supports novelty detection and adaptive thinking. Mrejeru links spikes in neuroplasticity to environmental disruptions, such as geomagnetic events that may have increased atmospheric carbon-14 levels and stimulated brain development. This aligns with archaeological evidence of sudden cognitive leaps during periods of planetary instability. Evolution, then, may have favoured not just bigger brains but more flexible, imaginative ones. Daydreaming, often dismissed as distraction, is in fact a critical feature of human cognition. As psychologist Eric Klinger noted, it allows the mind to test possibilities in a safe mental space. This aligns with Franklin and Greene's idea of a 'mental syntax'—a cognitive grammar that enables the brain to generate infinite thought combinations from a finite set of concepts. This generative capacity is where imagination meets language most powerfully. Yet this gift has its cost. As people gained the ability to manipulate symbolic detail, they lost some capacity for direct contextual awareness. Imaginary thinking emphasises content over

[206] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens. București: Integral.

environment; it abstracts and isolates. What was once a world of immediate relations becomes a world of representations. In return, humans gain art, religion, science, and culture—all systems rooted in language, all fuelled by imagination. Mrejeru proposes that civilisation itself is a sustained act of imagination: an augmentation of nature through symbols. To be Homo loquens is not simply to speak, but to speak of what does not yet exist, and then to make it so.

Brain transmutations

Perception is not the direct intake of reality—it is an interpretation, a story the brain tells itself to make sense of the flood of incoming signals. In 'How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens', Dan M. Mrejeru explores how this interpretive process evolved alongside language, reshaping not only how humans perceive the world but how they process meaning itself. The brain, he argues, does not merely receive data; it structures it, filters it, and ultimately transforms it into knowledge, a process that reflects a profound transmutation of cognitive function. This transformation begins with uncertainty. Perception is guided not by fixed structures but by deviations from randomness—moments that stand out as significant. From chaotic, unstructured stimuli, the brain extracts semi-structured patterns. These patterns are not objective truths but internal geometries of interpretation. Over time, evolution favoured organisms that could reduce this uncertainty, creating order out of noise. Perception became a selective act: highlighting what matters, discarding what does not. The brain's ability to make sense of the world follows a hierarchy: from raw data to information, from information to knowledge, and eventually to what might be called wisdom. This is not just a metaphorical chain. Each stage involves condensation and refinement. Unstructured data has high entropy and low specificity. As it is structured—through language, memory, and logic—it becomes more actionable, though less voluminous. The brain, in this model, acts less like a computer and more like an alchemist, transmuting disordered input into meaning-rich insight. Language plays a pivotal role in this cognitive alchemy. It introduced a new kind of structure—sequential, symbolic, and abstract. Unlike older forms of pattern recognition, which were spatial and correlative, language forced the mind into linearity. With grammar and syntax, humans began to think in terms of cause and effect, hypothesis, and conclusion. This was not just a change in communication—it was a reorganisation of thought. Mrejeru emphasises that this transition was evolutionary, not merely cultural. Brain structures adapted to support new forms of processing. Selection favoured those who could organise experience through symbolic systems. The result was a shift from nonlinear, affective thinking to logical, plan-oriented cognition. This did not erase older modes of thought but layered them within a new linguistic framework. The transformation also had a social dimension. As language became more structured, so did human communities. Shared narratives enabled coordination, prediction, and innovation. Knowledge became something that could be stored, transmitted, and refined across generations. Civilisations rose not only because people could build tools, but because they could build systems of meaning. What Mrejeru calls the 'transmutation' of brain processing reflects this deep restructuring of perception and thought. The human mind became an engine not just for survival, but for abstraction. It could now imagine futures, construct fictions, and act according to models that existed nowhere but in language.

Complexity and thinking

Language did not simply emerge as a tool for communication—it altered the structure of human thought itself. In 'The Hypothesis of Homo loquens', Dan M. Mrejeru argues that language introduced an entirely new dimension to cognition: the ability to produce and manage complexity through symbolic assembly, which gave rise to a new form of intelligence. This

intelligence, rooted in complexification, enabled humans to transcend the immediate present, to imagine, to innovate, and to construct systems far more intricate than any natural environment would demand. Complexification is a process by which discrete elements interact and organise into systems with emergent properties—qualities not inherent in the parts alone. In nature, this happens organically: cells combine into organs, species co-evolve in ecosystems. But with the advent of language, humans began to replicate this process consciously. They built systems of meaning, culture, and technology by combining symbolic units—words, sounds, gestures—into recursive, flexible structures. Language, then, was not just a mirror of thought but its architect. People began to think in ways that mimicked the way they spoke—assembling, disassembling, rearranging. This transformation was not merely cultural but biological. Mrejeru connects the rise of linguistic complexity with episodes of increased atmospheric radiation, such as the Laschamp geomagnetic excursion around 43,000 years ago. During this time, heightened carbon-14 levels may have stimulated oxidative processes in the brain, triggering bursts of neurogenesis. These biological changes increased plasticity in key regions like the hippocampus and precuneus, enabling pattern recognition, memory consolidation, and symbolic recombination—core capacities of complex and imaginative thought. From this neurological substrate, language carved a cognitive space in which thought could detach from perception. Humans began to construct not only sentences, but entire conceptual worlds. Imaginary thinking—the capacity to simulate events, hypothesise alternatives, and invent possibilities—emerged as a natural extension of linguistic recursion. The process of reconfiguring past experiences into novel expressions gave rise to myth, strategy, science, and art. Language facilitated migration, adaptation, and technological innovation. It allowed people to coordinate action at large scales, to embed knowledge into stories and tools. This cultural complexification drove biological evolution forward. As Harpending and Hawks observed, humans evolved faster in the last 10,000 years than at any time before, due in part to the feedback loop between language, culture, and selective pressure. Neuroscience now confirms that language uses distributed networks in the brain. It does not merely occupy the left hemisphere—it engages systems responsible for motor planning, social awareness, memory, and spatial reasoning. This widespread integration fosters emergent intelligence: a fluid, adaptive mode of thinking capable of navigating unprecedented problems. Language builds intelligence not from innate ability but from relational assembly—from the connection of symbols, patterns, and contexts. Yet complexity is not without its costs. As Joseph Tainter has shown, complex systems often face diminishing returns. The more intricate a society becomes, the more energy is required to maintain it. At a certain point, added complexity no longer solves problems but generates new ones. In cognitive terms, the same holds true: language allows the construction of detailed abstract systems, but as these grow in size and intricacy, the brain must work harder to process and sustain them. Moreover, as complexity accumulates, it becomes vulnerable to collapse. Artificial intelligence, for instance, now develops recursive systems at speeds and depths that humans cannot match. A gap opens between the complexity humans can comprehend and the systems they create. Language, once a tool of control, becomes the scaffolding of structures beyond control. There is also the energy cost of biological complexification. The brain, already the most metabolically expensive organ in the body, had to adapt by reducing neuronal firing rates to support increased internal connectivity. This trade-off slowed learning but allowed for long-term retention and abstract reasoning. External memory systems—writing, digital storage—compensated for the slowdown, but at the price of increasing dependency on external tools. Ultimately, the intelligence generated by complexification is not a stable endpoint but a dynamic process. Every system built through language must balance growth with coherence, imagination with grounding. Imaginary

thinking, born of language and neurogenesis, allows humans to imagine futures—but it also tempts them to lose sight of the real. The challenge is not only to build complexity but to sustain it without collapse.

The Left Hemisphere

Roughly 40,000 years ago, the human brain underwent a profound shift. Until then, cognitive activity was dominated by the right hemisphere—the seat of visual, emotional, and holistic thinking. This hemisphere gave early humans their synthetic grasp of reality, allowing for symbolic art, music, and spatial awareness. It was a mode of perception suited to a world understood through correlation and context, not yet constrained by sequential logic. But something changed. Over time, the brain began to favour the left hemisphere—analytical, verbal, linear—and this realignment would set the course for modern civilisation. What triggered the left hemisphere's rise? In 'Why the Modern Brain Favoured the Left Hemisphere' Dan Mrejeru[207] points to geomagnetic events—periodic disturbances in Earth's magnetic field that increased atmospheric carbon-14. These fluctuations, absorbed into DNA, may have boosted neurogenesis, particularly in the dentate gyrus of the hippocampus. The resulting uptick in brain plasticity favoured changes in memory processing, pattern separation, and symbolic abstraction. This neurobiological reshuffling did not erase the right hemisphere's functions but gradually tilted the balance. It set the stage for a new kind of cognition—analytical, dissective, and structurally recursive. Language was the tipping point. Around 30,000 years ago, humans developed increasingly complex verbal systems. The left hemisphere, with its aptitude for parsing sequences and managing syntax, was better suited for this emerging capacity. Unlike images or gestures, language unrolled thought in a line. To speak was to order time and experience. Grammar structured the world into subjects, actions, and objects. Thought, once spatial and associative, began to mimic speech itself. Verbal thinking became 'thinking-as-talking'. This cognitive shift allowed for the birth of imaginary thinking. No longer tethered to immediate sensory input, the mind could now assemble internal realities—narratives, hypotheticals, equations. The left hemisphere's facility with detail and geometry made it the architect of abstraction. It allowed humans to imagine that which did not yet exist, to calculate outcomes, to invent tools before building them. From this capacity arose mathematics, planning, and the conception of the individual self. Self-awareness intensified, as people increasingly experienced their own thoughts as discrete from the world. Even at the neurological level, this transition left traces. The left hemisphere exhibited heightened neurogenesis, more intense theta rhythms, and stronger specialisation in language processing. Rhythmic activity shaped by environmental factors—perhaps including geomagnetic variation—deepened this hemispheric asymmetry. The result was not simply a smarter brain, but a differently organised one. But this evolution came with a cost. The rise of the left hemisphere muted some of the holistic, integrative capacities of the right. Emotional nuance, spatial context, and the synthetic logic of dreams were gradually subordinated to analysis, calculation, and precision. The gains in symbolic reasoning were enormous—science, law, architecture—but the world also became less intuitive, less felt. The modern brain, then, is not a neutral result of growth but a directional transformation. It favours language, logic, and linearity—not because these modes are superior in all cases, but because they proved adaptive in an increasingly complex, symbolically mediated world. The speaking human became the planning human. And with each word spoken, the mind became a little more ordered—and a little more abstract.

[207] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) Why the Modern Brain Favored the Left Hemisphere, in The Making, the Rise, and the Future of the Speaking Man. București: Integral.

Power of chanting

In her article 'Science Proves the Power of Chanting[208]', Azriel ReShel presents a compelling case that ancient vocal practices—once seen as spiritual or mystical—are now being validated by neuroscience. Drawing on studies from both Western and Indian research, ReShel shows how rhythmic vocal repetition influences not only the body but also the structure and function of the brain. Chanting has long been part of spiritual traditions in India and Tibet. The Gyuto monks of Tibet, for example, produce deep harmonic chants that resonate in ways many describe as both calming and energising. In India, Sanskrit chanting is a core part of Vedic tradition. Young students, or 'pandits', begin memorising massive bodies of texts from an early age. One of these texts, the 'Shukla Yajurveda', can take over six hours to recite, requiring both cognitive stamina and precise control of tone and rhythm. Dr. James Hartzell, a neuroscientist and Sanskrit scholar, investigated what this intense oral training does to the brain. His findings, later described by ReShel, revealed striking differences between trained Sanskrit chanters and untrained individuals. Brain scans of twenty-one scholars at India's National Brain Research Centre showed that these chanters had up to 10% more grey matter across both hemispheres of the brain. Their right hippocampus, the region responsible for memory and pattern recognition, was notably larger. The right temporal cortex, linked to voice and sound processing, also showed enhanced development. These are not minor changes—they represent structural adaptations rooted in the discipline of vocal recitation. Such neurological benefits align with centuries of traditional belief. Chanting, in many ancient cultures, was considered a way to strengthen the mind, bring clarity, and maintain balance. Now, that belief is backed by physical evidence. Other historical examples reinforce this. In the 1960s, French physician Alfred Tomatis studied Benedictine monks who engaged in daily Gregorian chants. When their new abbot shortened their chanting hours, the monks became sluggish and exhausted—even though they had more time to rest. Once their chanting practice was restored, their vitality returned. Tomatis concluded that chanting was not merely devotional but physiological: it stimulated energy through sound. In today's world of digital noise and scattered attention, chanting offers a surprising antidote. The practice involves rhythm, breath, repetition, and vibration—elements that engage both body and mind. Even brief chanting sessions can reportedly increase focus, reduce stress, and improve emotional regulation. ReShel's article suggests that these practices could one day be adapted to help mitigate conditions like Alzheimer's or other memory-related disorders. What makes chanting especially powerful is its universality. It crosses religious and cultural lines. The act of rhythmic vocalisation—whether in Sanskrit, Latin, Arabic, or any language—connects humans to breath, sound, and presence. As mindfulness grows in popularity, chanting may offer a complementary tool, especially for those who find silent meditation challenging. Unlike silence, chant gives form to inner stillness. It becomes a way of shaping attention and embodying meaning. The secret of chanting lie in the resonance of repetition. Chanting transforms the voice into a vessel—not only of tradition, but of healing and clarity. Far from being a mystical relic, it is a discipline of sound that aligns body and brain. When words are sung with focus and reverence, they do more than echo. This inner transformation through voice mirrors what happens on stage, where language and presence together dissolve the boundaries of self, turning identity into something fluid and responsive. Yet chanting and singing are rarely solitary acts. They are shaped by the ears that receive them, aimed outward as much as inward—calling for resonance, recognition, or transformation in

[208] ReShel, A. (n.d.). Science Proves the Power of Chanting. Speaking into the Air. Available at: https://manaretreat.com/science-proves-the-power-of-chanting/ \[Accessed 6 Jul. 2025].

those who listen. On stage, the self is not a fixed identity but a porous performance, shaped by the presence of an audience. Rather than sealed psychological units, characters are fluid, fragmented, and open to the world beyond the play. When actors speak directly to audience, emotion becomes shared rather than internalised. This disrupts the illusion of coherence, turning theatre into a collaborative act. Shakespeare's stage welcomed this interplay—blurring boundaries between actor and role, fiction, and presence. Here, performance becomes an encounter, not an imitation. Theatrical truth lies not in realism, but in immediacy, vulnerability, and the recognition of unstable words and selves.

Cognitive instrument of voice

In the open-access study 'How Chanting Relates to Cognitive Function, Altered States and Quality of Life[209]', Gemma Perry and her colleagues examine the measurable psychological and neurological effects of chanting across traditions and cultures. Drawing on responses from 456 participants in thirty-two countries, the researchers investigate how various styles of chanting—ranging from repetitive prayer to musical call-and-response—affect mindfulness, mind wandering, flow states, and perceived life quality. What distinguishes this study from prior research is its emphasis on intention. The data suggest that the mere act of chanting is not enough to produce cognitive or emotional benefits. Rather, it is the level of focus, devotion, and clarity of purpose that determines how deeply the experience reshapes attention and mood. Participants who reported strong intentionality while chanting—whether through devotional prayer or meditative attention to sound—were more likely to experience reduced mental distraction and increased present-moment awareness. The study further identifies chanting as a reliable inducer of altered states of consciousness. These include both flow states, where attention becomes effortless and time perception shifts, and mystical experiences, marked by feelings of unity or transcendence. Interestingly, call-and-response chanting—often performed in group settings with rhythm and melody—produced stronger mystical experiences than solitary, silent chanting. This suggests that the social and auditory components of shared vocal practice contribute significantly to its transformative potential. From a cognitive standpoint, the effects of regular chanting are pronounced. Repetitive prayer styles were linked to decreased mind wandering and heightened concentration. This aligns with prior research on the neural effects of mantra repetition and meditation. With repetition comes rhythm, and with rhythm comes a recalibration of thought patterns. Chanting, in this light, becomes not just an expressive act but a neurological practice for directing mental energy. Moreover, the psychological benefits of chanting appear to ripple outward. Enhanced mindfulness and altered states indirectly improve participants' overall sense of well-being. Those who experienced frequent flow or mystical states also reported greater life satisfaction. In other words, the cognitive benefits of chanting do not operate in isolation—they are part of a larger shift in how individuals relate to their minds, their environments, and each other. The study's methodology involved psychometric testing across several variables, including measures of attention, mood, and subjective quality of life. Participants came from diverse traditions: Buddhist, Hindu, yogic, and even secular backgrounds. Regardless of belief system, the act of regular chanting showed similar patterns of cognitive and emotional change, suggesting that the mechanism lies not in the content of the chant but in the structure and intention behind it. These findings hold important implications for both science and society. In an age marked by digital overload and

[209] Perry, G., Polito, V., Sankaran, N. and Thompson, W\.F., 2022. How Chanting Relates to Cognitive Function, Altered States and Quality of Life. Brain Sciences, 12(11), p.1456. https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci12111456

attention fragmentation, chanting offers a simple, accessible method for cultivating mental clarity. Unlike many cognitive therapies or pharmaceutical interventions, chanting requires no external tools—only the voice, the breath, and the will to focus. It is ancient, yes, but increasingly validated by neuroscience as a practice of modern relevance. Chanting, once confined to ritual or spiritual devotion, is now emerging as a cognitive tool. Perry and her co-authors illuminate how the voice—when used rhythmically and intentionally—can recalibrate awareness, reduce distraction, and elevate mood. This research suggests that the power of chanting lies not only in tradition but in biology. When sound is paired with intention, the human mind begins to resonate with its own inner order.

Speech as performance

In 'How to Do Things with Words[210]'(1962), philosopher J. L. Austin challenges the traditional view that the sole purpose of language is to describe the world or state facts. He introduces a different category of speech: the performative utterance, where saying something is not describing but doing something. These utterances do not report on events—they are events. For instance, when a person says 'I do' during a wedding, the words themselves constitute the act of marriage. They are neither true nor false but succeed or fail depending on their context and execution. Austin identifies a pervasive misconception in philosophical traditions: the assumption that all utterances must be assessed by their truth value. While some language clearly functions that way—like 'The sky is blue'—many utterances do not aim to state facts. Instead, they perform actions. These include promising, naming, betting, and apologising, among others. The key idea is that language does not only represent reality; it often acts within it. The conditions for a successful performative utterance are precise. First, a conventional procedure must exist. Second, the person must be authorised to perform that act. And third, the act must be carried out properly and completely. If these felicity conditions are not met, the utterance fails—not as a misstatement, but as a misfire. For example, if someone declares, 'I hereby pronounce you husband and wife', but lacks the authority to officiate, the marriage does not happen, no matter how sincerely or fluently the words are spoken. Austin further distinguishes between different kinds of failures or infelicities. A misinvocation occurs when no valid procedure exists, or one is used incorrectly—like christening a ship with no bottle, ceremony, or tradition. A misapplication happens when the situation is inappropriate, such as someone trying to resign from a job they do not have. A misexecution results from errors or incomplete performance. Finally, abuses occur when a performative is executed insincerely, such as making a promise with no intention to fulfill it. Notably, performative utterances do not require an inward feeling to be valid. Saying 'I promise' creates a promise, regardless of the speaker's sincerity. What matters is that the utterance conforms to the recognised procedure and is publicly intelligible. This emphasis on external, social conditions over internal intention is one of Austin's most important contributions. It pushes back against views that language must be a transparent window into the speaker's mind. Moreover, Austin observes that performatives often depend on social rituals and collective recognition. Without a shared context, a performative utterance loses its power. The act is public, relational, and relies on mutual understanding. This moves language away from a merely individual function and grounds it firmly in the communal. The implications of this view are vast. It reframes law, religion, ceremony, and everyday interaction as deeply linguistic practices. Saying 'I apologise',

[210] Austin, J.L. (2018). How to Do Things with Words. Eastford: Martino Fine Books.

'I resign', or 'I forgive you' can alter relationships, legal statuses, or emotional landscapes—not because they convey facts, but because they are acts in themselves. Language becomes a tool for doing, not just for saying. This performative theory ultimately reshapes our understanding of communication. It shifts focus from passive observation to active participation. Words are not just passive vessels of thought—they are instruments of social construction. To speak, in many contexts, is to act. And to act through language is to step into a world of rituals, rules, roles, and consequences.

1.3. Modalities

(Framing reality: The grammar of possibility and belief)

'To say 'must' or 'may' is not merely to describe the world—it is to place yourself within it, navigating between certainty and doubt… Every modal utterance is a bridge between worlds: it draws from evidence, norms, ability, and desire to connect fact with value'.

Language of the modes

Polyphonic modality, the theoretical framework used to structure Renaissance music, was not a natural inheritance but an intellectual construction, a learnt system of musical grammar cultivated with precision and care. Frans Wiering's 'The Language of the Modes[211]' traces this development over five centuries, examining how modal concepts shaped compositional practice, music theory, and aesthetic discourse. The book makes clear that the modes were never fixed entities but evolving categories, reflecting changing theoretical priorities and cultural values. The earliest attempts to describe polyphonic modality struggled with adapting monophonic chant theory to polyphony's expanded ambitus and contrapuntal complexity. Theories of mode in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as those proposed by Amerus, were hesitant and inconsistent. By the late fifteenth century, figures like Johannes Tinctoris had begun to apply more confident definitions, treating the modal framework as a compositional resource. The term mode no longer simply referred to a chant formula; it became a way to classify, explain, and sometimes inspire musical works in which texture, harmony, and cadences played central roles. Throughout the sixteenth century, modal theory flourished, yet it remained controversial. Pietro Aaron, in 1525, acknowledged the challenge of grasping modality, describing it as elusive and difficult to articulate. His observation proved prescient: even as theorists like Glarean expanded the modal system from eight to twelve categories, no single vision prevailed. While some theorists insisted on rigid structures based on finals and ambitus, others embraced more flexible tonal types or hybrid systems such as Banchieri's psalm-tone keys. Despite this diversity, a shared vocabulary began to emerge—finals, species, cadences, and affects—linking theory with the compositional imagination. In performance, modality was both a guideline and a rhetorical device. Cadences, for instance, served as musical punctuation, confirming modal identity or intentionally undermining it. Similarly, melodic subjects often drew on recognisable intervallic patterns or chant-derived motives, reinforcing the sense of modal consistency. These features were not purely mechanical; they also carried expressive weight. As Zarlino and other Renaissance theorists noted, each mode was associated with an affective character—joyful, serious, contemplative—which aligned with humanist ideals about the ethical and emotional power of music. Wiering explores how polyphonic

[211] Wiering, F. (2001) The Language of the Modes: Studies in the History of Polyphonic Modality. New York: Routledge.

modality was conceptualised differently by influential scholars. Bernhard Meier treated mode as an intrinsic property of Renaissance compositions, analogous to key in later tonal music. For him, theoretical treatises mirrored actual practice, and deviations from modal norms were expressive choices rooted in textual meaning. In contrast, Harold S. Powers saw modes as post-hoc labels—emic categories within a culture-specific discourse. He emphasised tonal types, clef combinations, and system placements as more directly relevant to compositional process than abstract modal categories. This tension between natural property and classificatory label reflects a deeper ambiguity in the modal tradition. Was modality a blueprint followed by composers or a framework retrospectively applied by theorists? Wiering does not offer a definitive answer but instead highlights the importance of historical context. Modal usage varied by region, genre, and even by individual composer. For some, it was a vital expressive resource; for others, a formal shell required by tradition. As the seventeenth century unfolded, modal theory gradually gave way to tonal thinking. The decline of polyphonic modality was not abrupt but marked by a slow fading of theoretical interest, coupled with the rise of functional harmony and key-centred composition. Yet even in decline, modality persisted in certain didactic and sacred repertoires, its language increasingly ossified but still legible. Wiering concludes that modality was a language—one learnt, debated, and ultimately transformed. Like Latin, it demanded education, offered cultural prestige, and served as a medium for intellectual and artistic expression. Its disappearance signals not failure but change: a shift from one musical cosmology to another. The study of modes remains essential not because they forecast tonality, but because they illuminate a world in which music, theory, and meaning were inseparable.

Modes of modality

In contrast to traditional Cartesian views of Universal Grammar, which separate thought from language and treat language as a neutral structure for expressing pre-formed ideas, Un-Cartesian Linguistics emphasises language's generative role in shaping cognition. This alternative perspective holds that language is not simply a reflection of thought but the very medium through which humans form intersubjective understanding, objectivity, and reflective thought. Language does not merely transmit meaning—it creates the conditions for shared mental life. Among the grammatical structures that make this possible, modality plays a pivotal role, expressing degrees of possibility, necessity, intention, or belief. These are not merely linguistic flourishes but fundamental tools for navigating the uncertain space between the self and the world. The grammatical category of modality, then, stands as a cornerstone in the architecture of human cognitive life. Rooted in traditions stretching back to the Modistae's 'modes of signifying' (modi significandi), modality signals the human effort to reconcile perception with judgment, action with rule, and experience with social order. The Modistae, or speculative grammarians, were a group of 13th- and 14th-century philosophers active in northern Europe. Their theory, rooted in a tripartite structure—modes of being, understanding, and signifying—sought to link grammar with metaphysics. They argued that language reflects reality through deep grammatical structures, opposing nominalist views. Thomas of Erfurt's 'Grammatica Speculativa' became their central text, often misattributed to Duns Scotus. The Modistae anticipated ideas of universal grammar, suggesting all languages share an underlying structure. Their influence reached modern thought, notably inspiring Heidegger, who explored connections between speculative grammar and phenomenology in his early philosophical work. In modality the structure of language meets the texture of reality. Unlike lexical items, which refer to things or actions, modal forms configure the very relation one holds to those things: obligation, likelihood, permission, inference. A sentence with a modal is not only about what is but also about what could be, should be, or might have been. Modality's formal complexity

mirrors its cognitive weight. Within minimalist syntax, epistemic modality—expressing knowledge or belief—tends to operate in the higher clausal domains, while root modality—relating to obligation or ability—typically occurs in lower syntactic positions. This spatial distribution reflects the semantic layering of speaker perspective and event structure. These differences are not arbitrary; they suggest a consistent interface between cognition and grammar. Typological variation further illustrates modality's adaptability. Each system reflects different solutions to the same problem: how to communicate intention, judgment, and uncertainty. Modality, viewed through the lens of Un-Cartesian Linguistics, reveals language's unique function in bridging subjective consciousness and collective life. It is the vehicle through which personal beliefs are framed in publicly negotiable terms, enabling coordination, persuasion, and deliberation. The formality of modal expressions—whether in syntactic positioning, cross-linguistic realisation, or diachronic development—points to a universal need: to structure not only what is known, but how it is known and with what degree of commitment. In this sense, modality is not just a grammatical category but a condition of intersubjective life.

Moods and modality

In his book 'Modality[212]', Paul Portner explores the complex role modality plays in human language, situating it at the intersection of grammar, logic, and meaning. Modality, as Portner explains, allows speakers not only to describe the world but to speculate about other possible worlds. It makes language more than a report of facts—it opens realms of possibility, necessity, and obligation. Modal expressions—like must, can, might, and should—are the key tools by which speakers assess, evaluate, and imagine. Whether one says 'You must leave' or 'He might be sleeping', modality shifts the sentence beyond what is into what could, should, or must be. Portner's study focuses on sentential modality—the way entire statements express meanings related to possibility, necessity, obligation, or uncertainty. This includes not just modal verbs like must or might, but also adverbs, grammatical constructions like the future tense, and conditional sentences. Modality allows language to refer to situations that are not actual but possible, imagined, or dependent on certain conditions. Portner distinguishes between epistemic modality, which deals with knowledge and belief, and deontic modality, which relates to duties and permissions. He also examines how modality functions below the sentence level, in phrases or words that imply mental states, and at the level of discourse, where modal meanings unfold across multiple sentences. Some modal meanings are covert, expressed without explicit markers but still understood through context. The study connects modality with formal logic, particularly modal logic, which analyses how necessity and possibility function in reasoning. Portner also explores the relationship between modality and evidentiality, which signals the source of a speaker's knowledge, and how both may interact or overlap in some languages. Grammatical mood—such as the subjunctive or imperative—is another way languages express modality, linking syntactic form with semantic function. Ultimately, Portner shows that modality is not a peripheral feature but central to human language. It enables people to express uncertainty, belief, desire, and moral judgment. Through modality, speakers go beyond stating facts—they model alternatives, evaluate norms, and propose possibilities. The connection between mood and modality reveals how syntax and semantics converge to express layers of meaning. The broader implication of Portner's work is that modality is not just one aspect of meaning—it is foundational to how humans use language to model possibilities, norms, beliefs, and desires. Modality governs much of how humans navigate uncertainty and complexity. It is also deeply tied to ethical reasoning, allowing speakers to say not just what is, but what ought

[212] Portner, P. (2009). Modality. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

to be. The phrase 'You should help' makes no descriptive claim about the world—it proposes a moral evaluation, enabled by the modal structure of language. Portner's 'Modality' offers a comprehensive account of this system, uniting formal semantics with the lived functions of speech. His detailed categorisations—sentential, sub-sentential, and discourse modality—offer a framework for understanding how different layers of language work together to reflect the human capacity for abstract, conditional, and normative thought.

Organisation by category

In their comparative study 'Organisation by Modality, Language, and Category[213]', Jerker Rönnberg, Lars-Göran Nilsson, and Kjell Ohlsson examine how memory recall is influenced by different modes of presenting verbal information. Their focus is the modality effect—the finding that auditory input often leads to better short-term recall than visual input. Through a structured experiment involving sixty participants, the researchers explore how people organise and retrieve information when it is presented across different sensory, linguistic, and semantic dimensions. Their findings suggest that modality—specifically whether a word is heard or seen—exerts a more powerful organising influence on memory than either language or categorical similarity. The experiment involved three types of word lists: some that mixed auditory and visual presentation, some that used two languages (Swedish and English), and others composed of words from unrelated categories. Participants were asked to recall the words in any order they wished, allowing researchers to analyze how the information was organised internally. The results showed that people naturally tended to recall words grouped by the modality in which they were presented, even more than by language or meaning. This suggests that the brain may favour organising verbal data by how it is perceived—through hearing or seeing—rather than what it means or the language in which it was received. The study's most striking outcome was the strength of organisation by modality. Not only did participants show a clear tendency to group auditory and visual words separately in recall, but they also remembered auditory words more accurately. This confirms the classic modality effect and strengthens the argument that auditory information engages memory systems in a uniquely efficient way. One possible explanation is that auditory input benefits from a kind of echoic memory trace, allowing it to persist longer in the cognitive system than visual information, which may decay more quickly. Importantly, the researchers frame these findings within a functionalistic approach. Rather than viewing memory as a neutral container for information, they emphasise how cognitive structures organise material in ways that serve functions—in this case, preserving and retrieving verbal data efficiently. The preference for modality-based organisation may reflect a natural alignment between sensory input and memory architecture, where the channel through which information enters becomes a key anchor for how it is stored and recalled. These insights have broader implications for educational and communicative settings. If auditory presentation leads not only to better recall but also to stronger internal organisation, then spoken instruction and listening-based learning may offer distinct advantages, especially for tasks requiring memorisation. Similarly, mixed-modality approaches—where learners engage with both spoken and written forms—could enhance overall retention by activating multiple cognitive pathways. The study ultimately revives interest in the concept of organisation in memory research, a topic once central but now often overshadowed by other cognitive models. By showing how sensory modality shapes the structure of recall, Rönnberg and colleagues argue for a renewed focus on how the format of

[213] Rönnberg, J., Nilsson, L.-G. & Ohlsson, K. (n.d.). Organization by Modality, Language, and Category: A Comparative Study.

information presentation affects not only what is remembered, but how memory itself is constructed and accessed.

Formal approaches

Modality, the linguistic encoding of possibility, necessity, and other forms of hypothetical reasoning, has long been a central concern in philosophy and linguistics. In 'Formal Approaches to Modality[214]', Kaufmann, Condoravdi, and Harizanov offer a rigorous account of how modal expressions—such as must and should—can be formally analysed using tools developed in modal logic and possible world semantics. The authors begin by distinguishing various types of modality. Alethic modality concerns logical necessity and possibility, while epistemic modality relates to what a speaker knows or believes. Deontic modality involves rules, obligations, and permissions. Doxastic modality deals with beliefs, and temporal modality incorporates time-based considerations. Despite their surface differences, these forms of modality can often be treated using a shared logical structure. The foundation of this structure is modal logic, a formal system in which sentences are interpreted in relation to a set of possible worlds. The core idea is that modal statements refer not only to what is true in the actual world but also to what could be true in alternative scenarios. For example, 'It is possible that John is at the library' means that there exists at least one accessible world in which John is at the library. The expression 'John must be at the library' implies that he is there in all relevant accessible worlds. These accessibility relations are contextually determined and vary by modal base—the set of worlds taken to be relevant given a certain kind of knowledge, rule, or belief. One of the strengths of this formal approach lies in its precision. Modal operators signs such as for 'necessarily' and 'possibly' allow statements to be defined with logical interrelations. For instance, 'necessarily p' is logically equivalent to 'not possibly not-p'. This kind of formalisation enables clarity in comparing modal expressions across languages and contexts, revealing structural similarities and differences. The syntactic side of modal logic builds well-formed expressions through recursive application of modal operators and connectives. But the semantic side—possible worlds semantics—grounds these expressions in models consisting of sets of worlds, interpretation functions, and accessibility relations. These models serve as a powerful tool for analysing entailment, inference, and ambiguity in natural language. In addition to propositional modal logic, the book considers more sophisticated treatments of modality, including how modality interacts with time. Temporal modality reflects how the future is open to multiple possibilities, while the past is typically fixed. This asymmetry requires modal models that incorporate branching time structures and historical alternatives. For instance, a statement like 'She might go to Paris next week' involves quantifying over a future set of possible worlds that are compatible with the present. Further nuance arises from the interaction between modality and linguistic mood, such as the subjunctive or indicative, and evidentiality—how speakers indicate the source of their knowledge. While these topics extend beyond the book's focus, they suggest that modality is part of a larger network of intensional phenomena that encode complex human judgments about possibility, truth, and belief. Applying formal methods to the study of modality illuminates the underlying logic of modal expressions and their interaction with time, knowledge, and obligation. This approach demonstrates that even the most abstract aspects of language can be subject to systematic analysis, offering a model for how logic and linguistics together can clarify the machinery of thought and communication.

[214]Kaufmann, S., Condoravdi, C., & Harizanov, V. (2006) Formal Approaches to Modality. In P. Portner & B. H. Partee (eds), Formal Semantics: The Essential Readings. Oxford: Blackwell.

Conceptualisation

In 'Epistemic Modality, Language, and Conceptualisation[215]', Jan Nuyts explores the subtle but vital connections between how people speak about uncertainty and how they understand the world. The book goes beyond the formal study of language structures to consider how expressions of probability, possibility, and certainty reflect deeper layers of cognition. This approach, grounded in cognitive-pragmatic theory, treats epistemic modality not as a marginal linguistic feature but as a key window into how language operates in tandem with the mind. Epistemic modality refers to a speaker's assessment of the likelihood of a given situation—statements like 'She must be at work' or 'He's probably asleep' encode degrees of certainty. Traditional linguistic theories have tended to isolate such expressions within fixed grammatical categories, focusing on auxiliary verbs or adverbs as units of analysis. Nuyts challenges this view, arguing that modality is not simply a semantic add-on to syntactic structures but an integral part of the speaker's conceptual framework. Understanding modality, in this light, requires an analysis that bridges form and meaning, language and thought. What distinguishes Nuyts' treatment is his emphasis on how epistemic modality reveals a metarepresentational capacity—the ability to reflect on one's knowledge and beliefs, and to communicate this reflection. This capacity is deeply embedded in human cognition and is central to the functional use of language. Through expressions of epistemic modality, people navigate not just what they know, but how they know it, how confident they are, and what others might reasonably conclude. Such communication is essential for coordination, negotiation, and shared understanding in any social context. The book adopts a function-to-form approach: rather than starting with grammatical categories and seeking meanings for them, it begins with the communicative and cognitive functions that modality serves and looks for how these are realised in language. Four main linguistic vehicles are examined—sentence adverbs, adjectives, mental state verbs, and auxiliaries. Each is shown to carry epistemic weight, but in different ways and contexts. Drawing on data from Dutch, German, and English, Nuyts shows how these expressions interact with factors like sentence structure, information flow, and speaker intention. Importantly, the study does not treat epistemic modality as a closed category. Instead, it reveals that speakers continually adapt their linguistic strategies to reflect changing states of mind and levels of certainty. This dynamic, layered use of modality aligns with the concept of 'qualificational layering', wherein speakers modulate the conceptual status of statements according to context, intent, and shared knowledge. In this way, modality is shown to be a tool for shaping intersubjective understanding, not just a device for hedging or softening statements. Nuyts' study reframes modality as a deeply cognitive and interactive phenomenon. By linking linguistic forms to conceptual functions, he highlights how expressions of knowledge and belief are structured, not just grammatically, but psychologically. Modality, in this view, is a bridge between language and thought—an essential mechanism through which people negotiate reality and communicate their understanding of it.

Discourse modality

Language is not merely a tool for transmitting facts; it is a deeply human act of positioning the self in relation to others. In 'Discourse Modality[216]', Senko K. Maynard argues that the Japanese language reveals this expressive function with clarity. She challenges the common

[215] Nuyts, J. (2001) Epistemic Modality, Language, and Conceptualization: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Perspective. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

[216] Maynard, S.K. (2005) Discourse Modality: Subjectivity, Emotion and Voice in the Japanese Language. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

conception of language as primarily referential or logical and instead shows how non-referential, emotional, and interpersonal elements play a central role in communication. At the heart of Maynard's study is the claim that language always contains two intertwined layers: propositional content and the speaker's personal voice. Some words and grammatical forms present concrete descriptions of the world, while others reveal how the speaker feels, relates to others, or situates themselves socially. In Japanese, many expressions—modal adverbs, sentence-final particles, clause connectives—serve no clear referential function. Yet they are not meaningless. On the contrary, they communicate subtle nuances of emotion, stance, and interpersonal intent. This subjective voice, often missing in formal linguistic analysis, has long been a concern of Japanese scholarship. Thinkers such as Tokieda and Suzuki identified the split between 'shi' (objective content words) and 'ji' (subjective function words) to explain how the language encodes personal expression. Maynard builds on this tradition and expands it with a framework she calls 'Discourse Modality'—a system for analysing how language reveals the speaker's inner state and relation to others. Maynard identifies four key features of Discourse Modality. First is information qualification, where language marks the speaker's degree of certainty or emotional investment. Second is speech action declaration, where the speaker makes clear their intent—whether they are suggesting, requesting, asserting, or speculating. Third is participatory control, referring to how language coordinates shared attention or invites listener feedback. Finally, there is interactional appeal, where the speaker seeks emotional alignment or solidarity with the hearer. In Japanese, the interactional particle 'ne' offers a striking example. It does not add new information but seeks the listener's confirmation or empathy. Similarly, the modal adverb 'yahari' expresses expectations or emotions about a given situation rather than describing the situation itself. These forms show that language is not just about content; it is about shaping relationships, managing emotions, and expressing who the speaker is. Western linguistics has only recently begun to take such phenomena seriously. Structuralist and formalist traditions often treated emotion as peripheral or irrelevant. Yet Maynard insists that grammar and emotion are not separate spheres. Subjective and interpersonal meanings are part of language's structure, not deviations from it. What emerges from this view is a conception of language as fundamentally dialogic. Even monologues imply an imagined listener. Language is always addressed to someone, and its form is shaped by the relationship between speaker and hearer. This echoes Watsuji's philosophy of 'aidagara'—the 'betweenness' that defines human existence and, by extension, human communication. Maynard's goal is not to argue that Japanese is uniquely expressive but to use its features to illuminate a broader truth: that all language contains expressive, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions that standard semantic theories often ignore. By focusing on how language is used in discourse—not just what it says but how it is said—'Discourse Modality' proposes a more complete understanding of meaning. This discourse-based framework refocuses linguistic analysis on the speaker's presence in language. The study shows that subjectivity, emotion, and voice are not stylistic embellishments but foundational to communication. By foregrounding these modal characteristics, it offers a theory of language not as a mirror of the world, but as a medium for expressing the self within social life.

Modalities of thought

Kris Nelson's 'Modalities of Thought – Language and Reality[217]' offers a structured examination of how humans engage with reality through layers of thought. Drawing from classical and modern insights, Nelson situates human understanding within a progression from

[217] Nelson, K. (2022) Modalities of Thought – Language and Reality. Symbols & Reality.

myth and metaphor to philosophical logic and scientific validation. This development reflects both the historical unfolding of human culture and the cognitive capacities unique to human beings. At the heart of Nelson's framework lies the Trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Grammar collects and organises the raw material of experience—facts, symbols, and observations. Logic then works through these to eliminate contradictions, forming coherent ideas. Finally, rhetoric enables the outward expression of these refined thoughts. This triadic structure mirrors how humans come to know and speak truth: through careful ordering, critical evaluation, and meaningful articulation. Nelson organises human thought into three distinct modalities. The first is the mythological or poetic mode. Rooted in narrative and metaphor, it gives shape to experience through personification and symbolism. This mode can serve both as a tool of insight and as a mechanism of social control. Its truths are often emotionally resonant but logically imprecise. As understanding matures, thought enters the philosophical mode. Here, the mind seeks clarity by isolating concepts from metaphor. Philosophy explores being, knowledge, and ethics through abstraction and internal coherence. This modality replaces analogy with principle, aiming for rigor and generality. It reflects a shift from expression to examination, where the goal is not just to say what feels true but to test whether something is so. The third modality is scientific. It draws upon the philosophical mode but adds the demand of verification. The scientific method tests claims against the natural world, seeking repeatable and falsifiable results. This approach recognises the limits of intuition and insists that knowledge be accountable to evidence. In Nelson's framework, science is not superior to the earlier modes but more constrained—it deals with what can be demonstrated rather than what can be imagined or felt. Nelson expands the discussion by linking thought to consciousness. All organisms respond to stimuli, but only humans are capable of abstraction, symbolisation, and ethical deliberation. Consciousness thus becomes not merely an evolutionary feature but a moral responsibility. To think clearly is not only to know but also to act rightly. This demands vigilance, as modern societies increasingly delegate thinking to systems—technological, bureaucratic, or ideological—that encourage conformity and diminish accountability. A key concern is that overspecialisation, media saturation, and cultural programming have fragmented individual responsibility. When thinking is outsourced, morality falters. Thought becomes passive, guided by convenience or consensus rather than truth. Nelson urges reclaiming the ability to think independently, using the Trivium as a form of intellectual self-defence. The work concludes with an appeal to discipline and clarity. Thought is not merely mental activity but the act of aligning one's understanding with reality and one's actions with principle. In cultivating grammar, logic, and rhetoric as living skills, humans affirm their nature as moral beings capable of truth and meaning.

2. SMALL TALK

2.1. Phatic speech

(The ritual of speech: The social power of small talk)

'What we call trivial talk is not trivial at all: it is the ritual by which we affirm shared social order'.

— Michael Silverstein, The Culture of Communication

'The phatic function serves to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works'.

— Roman Jakobson, Linguistics and Poetics

Phatic function

In her article 'Exploring Jakobson's 'Phatic Function' in Instant Messaging Interactions[218]', Dipti Kulkarni examines how language functions not simply to convey information but to maintain contact between communicators in digital settings. Building on Roman Jakobson's theory, which describes the phatic function as a means of ensuring the channel of communication remains open, the study shifts focus to how such expressions operate in instant messaging—where non-verbal cues are absent and linguistic tokens take on the burden of sustaining interaction. Instant messaging, unlike face-to-face talk, is shaped by its asynchronicity and lack of physical presence. In this context, even a simple 'hmm' or 'ok' can carry significant communicative weight. These utterances may appear trivial or devoid of content, but their primary function is social. Kulkarni's analysis, drawn from a corpus of sixty chat logs in English, Hindi, and Marathi, reveals how users rely on phatic markers to establish, maintain, and close conversations—strategies that are far from incidental. Openings in IM often begin with greetings like 'Hi' or 'Hey', but many interactions dive straight into a topic, especially among close acquaintances or in work-related chats. This skipping of formal pleasantries does not indicate rudeness—it reflects a tacit understanding of shared context and mutual familiarity. The act of beginning a conversation in this way is itself phatic: a reaffirmation that the communicative link is active. The middle phase of conversations shows how language adapts to the absence of tone, gesture, and expression. Minimalist back-channel responses ('hmm', 'k', 'lol') perform the essential task of confirming attention and engagement. Expressive interjections like 'wow', 'yikes', or 'aww' maintain emotional proximity between speakers, simulating the affirming nods or sympathetic expressions of physical interaction. Questions—especially those that do not demand real answers—function as contact-maintaining tools, signalling interest and keeping the exchange flowing. Closings are equally revealing. Some users engage in ritualised goodbyes—'bye', 'take care', 'ttyl'—while others simply vanish, ending the chat with silence. This inconsistency reflects the flexible, open-ended nature of IM conversations, where interactions are often continuous and fragmented, unlike the clearly bounded structure of spoken dialogues. Even an abrupt exit can be read as a phatic act, a silent understanding that the channel will remain open for future reconnection. What emerges from Kulkarni's research is the centrality of phatic communion in sustaining digital social life. These linguistic strategies, subtle and frequently overlooked, are not merely functional but socially vital. They maintain a sense of shared presence and attentiveness, even when nothing substantial is being said. Phatic expressions in digital communication are not ornamental. They are foundational to the way people sustain bonds in the increasingly text-based landscape of human interaction. The study invites us to rethink what counts as meaningful communication, suggesting that sometimes the mere act of showing up—linguistically—is enough to affirm the social thread that binds interlocutors together.

[218] Kulkarni, D. (2013) Exploring Jakobson's 'Phatic Function' in Instant Messaging Interactions, Discourse & Communication, SAGE Publications.

Phatic communion

Gunter Senft, in his discussion[219] of Bronisław Malinowski's concept of 'phatic communion', revisits one of the earliest attempts to understand language not as a tool for transmitting information but as a means of sustaining social ties. Originally introduced in Malinowski's 1923 essay 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages', 'phatic communion' refers to speech whose primary function is not to communicate ideas but to foster fellowship and relational continuity between speakers. Malinowski developed this theory during his fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders. His insights came not from abstract theorising but from translating magical formulae and observing daily speech acts. Unlike the Western assumption that language primarily conveys information, Malinowski argued that much of speech in everyday life serves to establish rapport. Remarks about the weather, polite greetings, and repeated expressions of concern like 'How are you?' are not inquiries in the literal sense, but rather linguistic rituals that reaffirm social connection. According to Malinowski, silence between people can be perceived as threatening. The 'communion of words', however trivial in content, signals safety and trust. This insight reoriented linguistic and anthropological thinking toward the social function of language and inspired Roman Jakobson to incorporate the phatic function into his model of communication. Jakobson categorised it as the use of language to open, maintain, or close a channel of communication. Although Jakobson's model popularised the term phatic communication, some scholars argue that 'communion', with its emphasis on human connection, better captures Malinowski's intent. Despite its foundational status, the concept has attracted critiques. Dell Hymes questioned its universality, pointing to cultures where silence is not seen as discomforting but as respectful or appropriate. For instance, among the Paliyans in South India, and the Wishram Chinook along the Columbia River, speech is restrained and often avoided unless necessary. David Crystal similarly noted cultural variation in the form and content of phatic expressions. While British small talk often revolves around the weather, Rundi women in Burundi part with references to household duties. These examples show that the function of phatic communion may be consistent across cultures, but the form it takes is deeply embedded in local norms and values. The idea that phatic speech lacks content has also been challenged. Among the Trobriand Islanders, the common greeting 'ambeya' ('where are you going?') serves not only to establish a social bond but also to exchange relevant information about one's location or intentions. It combines the affective with the pragmatic, reminding us that even seemingly empty phrases can carry dual functions—relational and informational. Later scholars such as John Laver expanded the theory to include the transitional phases of interaction—greetings, small talk, farewells—that help manage social distance and psychological comfort. Florian Coulmas added that phatic language reflects social hierarchies and expectations, as seen in culturally loaded apologies or ritual expressions. Phatic communion, then, is more than idle chatter. It is a subtle mechanism through which humans confirm their shared presence, maintain cohesion, and navigate the boundaries of interaction. Though often overlooked, these communicative rituals form the architecture of social life, revealing the depth of meaning in words spoken just to speak.

Small talk in the digital age

In their article 'Small Talk in the Digital Age: Making Sense of Phatic Posts[220]', Danica Radovanovic and Massimo Ragnedda explore how social media platforms are reshaping

[219] Senft, G. (1986) Phatic Communion, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen.
[220] Radovanovic, D. and Ragnedda, M. (2022) Small Talk in the Digital Age: Making Sense of Phatic Posts, University of Belgrade & University of Sassari.

traditional notions of conversation. Drawing on Bronislaw Malinowski's concept of 'phatic communion' and Roman Jakobson's 'phatic function' of language, they argue that the seemingly trivial, non-informational posts people share online—such as 'Good morning!' or 'Coffee time'—serve essential social purposes in maintaining human connection. Phatic posts, unlike content designed to convey information or persuade, are aimed at affirming presence and maintaining relationships. A 'like' on a friend's post, a one-word comment, or a shared meme may appear empty of substance, but these micro-interactions mimic nods, smiles, or greetings in face-to-face conversation. They confirm that the social line is still open, that someone is there and paying attention. In the digital world, these gestures are essential to reinforcing what the authors call 'networked sociality'—a distributed sense of belonging mediated by platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The motivations behind these phatic posts are manifold. One is the desire to signal presence. A short update or emoji may serve as a low-effort way to announce that one is online and emotionally available. Another motive is to build intimacy through the mundane. By sharing snippets of daily life, users invite others into their routine, using banality as a tool of emotional closeness. Even a status like 'watching the rain' offers a small window into someone's experience, enough to draw in a response and keep the digital thread alive. The article also highlights how technology itself shapes this behaviour. Features such as the 'like' button, stories, or check-ins encourage communication that is quick and frictionless. These lightweight exchanges are not accidental but are structurally incentivised by the design of platforms, which prioritise engagement and social feedback loops over depth of content. In a world where attention is scarce, phatic posts allow users to stay socially relevant without the demands of extended conversation. Radovanovic and Ragnedda pay special attention to younger users who often use phatic communication in coded ways. Teenagers, for example, may post vague or symbolic messages to express feelings or maintain peer bonds while avoiding direct statements. This kind of indirect social signalling reflects not only digital literacy but also a deep understanding of how to navigate public and private spaces simultaneously. The phatic post, then, is not meaningless. It is a gesture—a nod across a crowded digital room. It maintains the rhythm of social life online, sustaining ties, avoiding silence, and reminding others that one is still there. As human interaction becomes more mediated by screens, these small moments carry unexpected weight.

Meaning in primitive languages

In his supplementary essay 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages' (1923), Bronisław Malinowski challenges conventional theories that regard language as merely a conduit for thought. Instead, he argues that language derives its meaning from use, function, and the specific social contexts in which it appears. Language, in his view, is not a passive reflection of ideas but a form of action deeply embedded in cultural life. Malinowski begins by aligning himself with Ogden and Richards' broader theory of symbolism, emphasising that linguistic meaning cannot be grasped in isolation. He insists that a scientific understanding of language, especially for unwritten or 'primitive' languages, requires attention to what he terms the 'context of situation'. Words spoken by members of a community only make sense when seen in relation to the practical, emotional, and ritual environments in which they are uttered. Unlike the abstract, dictionary-based understanding of language common in Western philosophy, Malinowski's focus is on the lived experience of communication. He asserts that so-called primitive languages do not exist to express detached ideas but rather to perform essential human tasks: coordinating work, expressing feelings, maintaining social bonds. In this sense, language is an instrument of human action. Early speech, he notes, often consists of gestures, repetitions, exclamations, and rhythm—tools for interaction more than reflection.

Even children, he observes, learn language not through logical deduction but through repeated exposure in specific social and emotional contexts. This understanding complicates the task of translation. A word in one language might be steeped in social rituals or local beliefs, making it nearly impossible to render in a language like English without lengthy explanation. For example, certain terms among the Trobriand Islanders refer to specific practices of exchange or magic that have no equivalent in modern industrial societies. Ethnographic work, then, must do more than decode words—it must also describe the cultural practices that give those words their meaning. One of Malinowski's more intriguing insights concerns the magical quality attributed to words in many traditional societies. Language is often treated as a force in itself—a means of influencing the world. From spells to blessings, these uses suggest that for many communities, speech is not a symbol of power but power itself. This attitude, he warns, can still be found today in the belief that language somehow reflects reality perfectly or that naming something gives one control over it. He also notes how grammatical structures reflect real, lived categories: objects and actions, persons, and commands. Unlike the neat grammatical divisions of Western languages, so-called primitive tongues often mix and bend these categories, prioritising function over form. Malinowski presents a vision of language as a practical, embedded, and symbolic tool—shaped by the needs and activities of human beings rather than by abstract logic. His work contributes not just to anthropology or linguistics, but to a broader understanding of how meaning itself arises from doing, not simply from thinking.

Phatic interpretations

In their influential article 'Phatic Interpretations and Phatic Communication[221]', Vlad Žegarac and Billy Clark revisit the traditional concept of phatic communication, proposing a cognitive approach grounded in Relevance Theory. Rather than seeing phatic utterances as merely polite or socially obligatory, they argue these interactions are underpinned by deeper mental processes that help individuals interpret communicative intentions. The authors challenge the long-standing assumption that phatic communication is superficial or secondary. Instead, they suggest it should be viewed as a complex form of meaning-making, where utterances are interpreted less for their propositional content and more for the intentions they signal. Phrases like 'How are you?' or 'Nice weather today' may appear empty, but Žegarac and Clark reveal how such statements carry implicatures—meanings derived from context rather than literal content. They introduce several key distinctions. A 'phatic interpretation' focuses on the speaker's intention to communicate rather than the explicit message. A 'phatic utterance' is any expression designed to provoke such an interpretation. And 'phatic communication' refers broadly to the entire interaction aimed at establishing, maintaining, or negotiating a social connection. This redefinition allows phatic talk to be seen not as filler, but as essential to managing relationships. Importantly, the paper emphasises that phaticness exists on a spectrum. Not all statements are purely or entirely phatic. A remark might begin as a greeting but evolve into meaningful dialogue depending on the context and the participants' responsiveness. In this way, phatic utterances are dynamic: they invite a particular kind of attention to interpersonal context and emotional resonance, often functioning as tests of social rapport. Žegarac and Clark also explore how context and relationship dynamics affect interpretation. In moments of tension or emotional distance, even a simple 'hello' can take on heightened significance. The fact that communication occurs at all may be more telling than the words exchanged. Conversely, in

[221] Žegarac, V. and Clark, B. (2019). Phatic interpretations and phatic communication. Openrepository.com. [online] doi:https://doi.org/0022-2267.

close relationships, certain phrases become ritualised but still meaningful in signalling presence and continuity. The authors use scenes from films like 'Groundhog Day' to illustrate how phatic exchanges operate. In these examples, characters often rely on routine, repetitive speech to maintain civility, mask discomfort, or create openings for further interaction. Even empty-sounding lines carry social and emotional weight. Another innovation in their analysis is the inclusion of non-ostensive and covert phatic communication. Not all phatic acts are direct or obvious. Subtle cues—glances, gestures, or silences—can perform the same function, suggesting that someone is open to interaction or seeking acknowledgment. Such moments demonstrate that phatic communication is not restricted to words but includes a broad range of semiotic behaviour. Žegarac and Clark's work reframes phatic speech as a meaningful part of human cognition and interaction. By applying Relevance Theory, they show that even the most mundane utterance may carry implicit intentions, requiring interpretation that draws on both cognitive effort and social understanding. Far from being trivial, phatic communication reveals the subtle interplay between thought, speech, and the social world.

Design of community

The paper from Kevin Makice 'Phatics and the Design of Community[222]' explores how Twitter, as a platform for lightweight, relational communication, can support and enhance community awareness. Rather than focusing on the informational content of posts, the study emphasises the phatic function of communication—language whose primary purpose is to maintain social bonds. Drawing on Jakobson's framework and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research, it presents phatic interaction as a core principle for designing socially aware digital environments. Twitter provides a compelling case for understanding how phatic exchanges—brief updates, likes, retweets, or emoji responses—can nurture both strong and weak social ties. Unlike face-to-face communication, which traditionally builds strong relationships, platforms like Twitter allow users to maintain loose connections across broad networks. These weak ties, once dismissed as insignificant, are now recognised for their capacity to expand access to resources, ideas, and opportunities. They serve as bridges between communities, fostering connectivity without the pressures of deep engagement. One of the central ideas in the study is that phatic communication should not be viewed as noise or triviality. On the contrary, these small acts of acknowledgment—whether a tweet, a like, or a glance at a shared display—play an essential role in shaping communal awareness. Just as saying 'hello' in a hallway serves to affirm presence and social continuity, micro-interactions online function to maintain social cohesion. They indicate that people are present, attentive, and willing to engage. To illustrate this, the study presents several HCI projects designed around phatic principles. One example, 'The Cube', used personalised visual codes to facilitate simple, supportive messages among users. Another, 'SynchroMate', allowed couples to send signals via vibrations and colours to express mood or presence without needing full conversation. These systems demonstrate how phatic technologies complement more content-heavy communication, reinforcing emotional or social proximity through minimal interaction. The study also highlights TwitterSpaces, a 2008 university-based installation where tweets from students, alumni, and faculty were displayed in shared physical areas. This created a kind of digital town square, allowing community members to casually observe each other's activities. Although it did not increase foot traffic, it did significantly improve awareness and connection

[222] Makice, K. (2009). Phatics and the design of community. CHI '09 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems, pp.3133–3136. doi:https://doi.org/10.1145/1520340.1520445.

within the academic environment. Such installations reveal how visualising phatic interaction can make social ties more tangible and encourage participation. The river metaphor applied in Twitter stream analysis captures how users navigate streams of information. These personal information streams (PInS) are not merely informational; they are curated flows of relational gestures. Understanding these streams helps explain how users participate in social networks not just by exchanging content, but by sustaining social presence and continuity. Ultimately, the thesis argues for the design of sociable systems that acknowledge the rhythms of connection and disconnection inherent in human relationships. Phatic communication, often overlooked, emerges as a foundational element of digital sociability. It is a way of being with others, however briefly, in a world increasingly defined by dislocation and rapid exchange.

Communication as phatic

In the evolving landscape of digital communication, the role of the professional communicator is shifting. Rather than merely transmitting information or persuading audiences, communication increasingly serves a relational purpose: establishing and sustaining social presence. The article 'Professional Communication as Phatic: From Classical Eunoia to Personal Artificial Intelligence[223]' by Karen Schriver repositions phatic communication as a core function of professional discourse, especially in online and intercultural settings. Traditionally viewed as trivial or secondary, phatic communication involves speech acts that express sociability rather than content. From a simple 'hello' in an email to the use of emojis in a user help forum, these interactions are less about information and more about connection. Drawing on Malinowski's foundational theory of phatic communion and Jakobson's later linguistic typology, Schriver argues that the function of phatic communication should be elevated to a primary objective in digital professional environments. The article connects phaticity to classical rhetoric, particularly the Greek concept of 'eunoia'—goodwill between speaker and audience. Ancient rhetoricians like Aristotle and Cicero understood that emotional and ethical bonds underpin effective persuasion. This goodwill, Schriver suggests, is echoed today in the role of phatic discourse: not as idle chatter but as a vital precondition for meaningful communication in professional life. Email exchanges, for instance, often neglect this function, resulting in messages that appear cold or detached. Including brief but sincere greetings or personal touches helps establish rapport, particularly in global communication where cultural expectations may differ. Schriver points out that what may seem like redundancy to some—such as formal greetings or small talk—is often a crucial act of respect in other cultures. Virtual teamwork especially benefits from phatic interactions. Distributed teams rely on a shared sense of presence and trust, built not just through performance metrics but also through regular, casual communication. Even seemingly minor interactions like brief check-ins or friendly comments can solidify group cohesion, making collaboration smoother and more humane. In user forums and help communities, phatic exchanges create an atmosphere of openness. Instead of treating help requests as technical problems to solve, moderators and participants often begin with greetings, affirmations, or encouragement. This establishes a welcoming tone and encourages user participation, turning isolated inquiries into shared experiences. Schriver also explores the rise of AI-powered 'phatic bots', which simulate human interaction in professional and customer service settings. These bots, like Xiaoice or scheduling assistants like Amy from x.ai, are

[223] Porter, J.E. (2017). Professional Communication as Phatic: From Classical 'Eunoia' to Personal Artificial Intelligence.. Business and Professional Communication Quarterly, [online] 80(2), pp.174–193. Available at: https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1144575 [Accessed 18 Jul. 2025].

designed to maintain relational continuity with minimal content. However, the ethical implications are complex: as these systems mimic empathy and social awareness, there is a risk of creating synthetic relationships that blur the boundary between sincere and simulated care. The article argues for integrating phatic awareness into communication design. Professional communicators must become curators of social engagement, not just transmitters of facts. Phatic communication reinforces the human element in a world increasingly mediated by screens and algorithms, reminding us that the essence of professionalism lies not only in clarity or accuracy, but in connection.

2.2. Banal speech

(Banality of belonging: Language without meaning, presence without depth)

'Superficial talk is not the enemy of connection—it is often its quiet foundation'.

— Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

'Banality is not the absence of meaning, but the repetition of meaning until it becomes invisible'.

— Roland Barthes, Mythologies

Banality

The word 'banal' carries the connotation of something trite, dull, or unremarkably common. But its origins reveal a more layered and historical sense of meaning. Emerging from the French banal, the term initially referred to things tied to feudal authority—specifically, communal facilities mandated by a lord's decree. From the Old French banel, meaning 'communal' or 'pertaining to the decree', it derives from the Germanic root bannan, meaning 'to speak publicly' or 'to issue a proclamation'. In medieval life, this public proclamation established obligations—restrictions that compelled peasants to use the services and tools of their feudal superiors. Such declarations gave rise to banalités in France: feudal dues and monopolies that dictated the daily economic life of serfs. A peasant was not free to grind grain in a hand mill or bake bread in a personal oven. Instead, they had to use the four banal—the communal oven owned by the local lord—and pay for it. The same applied to the mill and the wine press. Even animal breeding was regulated under 'banalité de tor et ver', restricting who could own bulls or boars. These rights not only asserted economic control but also preserved a visible, repetitive social hierarchy. This feudal system of enforced sameness—where every loaf of bread, sack of flour, or jug of wine passed through the lord's sanctioned mechanism—slowly evolved in language to represent not just common use, but something worn-out and devoid of individuality. 'Banal' thus slid from its legal and communal origin into a cultural descriptor for anything overly familiar, lacking originality, or stripped of particularity. The peasant's compulsory routine echoed in the word's semantic shift toward describing dull repetitions of thought, speech, or action. Interestingly, some of these communal constraints had pragmatic value. In New France, for instance, the required use of the seigneurial mill ensured the building and upkeep of reliable flour mills, which also doubled as defensive structures. In this context, the banalité was not merely a burden, but part of a system of shared infrastructure and survival. Nonetheless, the broader sentiment remained: the banality imposed from above dulled not just

economic freedom but human expression itself. By the time the French Revolution erupted, banalités became a symbol of everything archaic and oppressive in the Ancien régime. Their abolition on August 4, 1789, was a decisive blow against the embedded networks of aristocratic privilege. Though compensation was granted to some lords until 1793, the deeper significance lay in the symbolic gesture: the rejection of the compulsion to conform, to follow dictated rhythms, and to participate in preordained, communal monotony. Today, to call something 'banal' is to accuse it of offering nothing new—of being a tired echo of a once-enforced structure. But underneath that accusation lies a history of control, of the transformation of speech and decree into an architecture of habit, and of how structures of utility can degenerate into patterns of thoughtless repetition.

Banal nationalism

Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism', developed in his 1995 book 'Banal Nationalism[224]', redefined how scholars think about the everyday reproduction of national identity. Rather than limiting nationalism to dramatic political events or extremist ideologies, Billig focused on the subtle cues embedded in daily life—mundane practices that quietly affirm the nation's presence without drawing attention to themselves. These are the unnoticed flags on public buildings, the weather forecasts that speak only of 'our country', and the default use of national symbols on money, stamps, or sports teams. The power of banal nationalism lies in its invisibility. Unlike overt or 'hot' nationalism, which may provoke controversy, banal nationalism appears natural and unremarkable. Yet it operates continuously, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging through habits and linguistic choices. When a citizen refers to 'our government' or cheers for 'our team' at an international event, a national identity is being reaffirmed, even if unconsciously. These seemingly apolitical acts are crucial to sustaining the idea of the nation-state. Billig's work challenged the optimism of the 1990s, when many scholars believed that nationalism was in decline due to globalisation. Ulrich Beck, for instance, argued that a new era of 'banal cosmopolitanism' was emerging, where global identities would replace national ones. But Billig was sceptical of this assumption, warning that nationalism was not disappearing—it was becoming more deeply woven into the everyday fabric of life. Events in the decades since, including the rise of populist nationalism and stricter immigration policies, have proven him right. Banal nationalism is not merely benign. Billig argued that its quiet omnipresence can serve as a base for more aggressive forms of nationalism. When people become accustomed to thinking in national terms, it becomes easier to draw stark boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Even peaceful symbols can be mobilised in support of exclusion, conflict, or xenophobia. The same school ritual that teaches national pride may also reinforce the belief that outsiders do not belong. One of the key contributions of 'Banal Nationalism' was to shift the focus from the spectacular to the ordinary. Instead of asking when nationalism appears, Billig asked where it hides. This approach inspired a wave of scholarship exploring how nationalism is performed, reinforced, and contested in everyday contexts. For instance, national identity can be seen in how people use language, consume media, or define citizenship. It is expressed not only through state institutions but also through the choices and practices of individuals. Billig later acknowledged that his binary distinction between 'hot' and 'banal' nationalism was too rigid. These forms often overlap. A news article may calmly report on government policy while subtly reinforcing nationalist assumptions. A protest might invoke patriotic language in both radical and routine ways. Nationalism, in this view, operates along a spectrum rather than in distinct categories. What makes Billig's concept enduring is its

[224] Billig, M. (1995) Banal Nationalism. London: SAGE Publications.

insistence that nationalism remains central—not as an outdated relic, but as a living structure that shapes how people imagine politics and community. It continues to define who counts as 'the people', whose voices matter, and what kinds of futures are possible.

Banal cosmopolitanism

Ingrid Piller's analysis of multilingual 'welcome' signs, in her article 'Banal Cosmopolitanism: The Illusion of Multilingual 'Welcome' Signs[225]', offers a compelling critique of how linguistic tokens of inclusion can, paradoxically, expose the shallow performance of diversity. These signs, which appear in airports, shopping centres, universities, and other public venues, claim to greet all visitors regardless of language or origin. Yet, their presence often communicates less about hospitality and more about a desire to appear globally minded—a display meant more for the self-image of the host than for the practical or emotional benefit of the guest. Piller traces the history of this phenomenon with a revealing anecdote from the 1970s, when a traveller in Japan, armed only with a Latin-script map, found himself lost among signs in Japanese. The only legible message was 'Welcome!'—a word that, while friendly, offered no actual help in navigation. This story becomes an allegory for today's globalised landscapes, where superficial gestures toward inclusion—especially through language—frequently fail to support genuine understanding. This form of empty hospitality is what Piller calls 'banal cosmopolitanism', borrowing from Michael Billig's idea of 'banal nationalism', in which flags or anthems silently reinforce identity without conscious reflection. In the cosmopolitan version, the symbols are less about national unity and more about suggesting international openness. Signs in multiple languages, stylised foreign scripts, and culturally ambiguous branding all serve to affirm a community's commitment to diversity, at least on the surface. The irony is that these signs often fail to communicate with the very people they ostensibly address. Poorly executed translations, misrendered scripts, and incorrect formatting—especially of right-to-left languages like Arabic or Persian—betray a lack of cultural competence. A 'welcome' sign at the University of Limerick, for instance, butchered the Persian phrase 'خوش آمدید' by re-ordering the letters from left to right using Google Translate, rendering it meaningless. Such errors do not merely fail in communication; they turn a message of inclusion into one of exclusion and embarrassment. Piller argues that the real function of these signs is symbolic reassurance for the dominant local population. They declare, 'We are open, tolerant, globally aware', but they do so in a way that requires no deep engagement with the languages or cultures they reference. The foreign words become ornamental, like decorative motifs in a corporate lobby, rather than tools for meaningful interaction. For actual speakers of these languages, the message can feel alienating—a token of welcome that simultaneously signals disinterest in the authenticity of their voice. Rather than fostering true multilingual communication, these signs commodify language into a global aesthetic. Their prevalence signals not a deep respect for diversity, but a stylised performance of it. In this way, banal cosmopolitanism does not dismantle linguistic barriers; it paints over them with a thin coat of inclusive imagery that reassures the majority and mystifies the rest.

[225] Piller, I. (2017). Banal cosmopolitanism. [online] Language on the Move. Available at: https://www.languageonthemove.com/banal-cosmopolitanism/ [Accessed 18 Jul. 2025].

Digital banal

In 'The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture[226]', Zara Dinnen explores how digital technologies shape life so seamlessly that they become invisible. The concept of the 'digital banal' captures this condition—where the digital is no longer extraordinary but embedded in ordinary, daily interactions. Smartphones, social media, and algorithms mediate experience, yet their influence is rarely acknowledged. Their invisibility is not accidental but structural, sustained by narratives that present technological change as neutral or inevitable. Dinnen argues that digital interfaces, like those of Facebook or Google, disguise their mediation. They appear as natural extensions of human connection rather than systems of control. For instance, when Apple declared the iPhone 4 would 'change everything', it framed radical transformation as routine progress. This sleight of hand reframes novelty as banality and innovation as expectation. Similarly, metaphors like 'the Cloud' erase the physical and ecological costs of digital infrastructure—data centres, energy use, rare minerals—while fostering a sense of abstract, frictionless convenience. In fiction, this dynamic is reflected in the way digital life appears backgrounded. Novels like A.M. Homes's 'May We Be Forgiven' include emails, searches, and texts without fanfare, as if these interactions were unremarkable. Yet, it is precisely through these details that the digital banal is revealed. Dinnen draws on Roland Barthes's notion of the 'reality effect', where minor, realist details bolster believability. In the same way, a character's quiet use of Google makes the digital seem real and mundane, even as it marks a significant shift in how people think, relate, and act. Facebook, for Dinnen, exemplifies the digital banal. Its platform creates the illusion of constant presence and emotional intimacy while in fact fostering detachment, algorithmic curation, and shallow interaction. The result is what Katherine Losse calls 'noncommittal proximity'—a kind of social life mediated by screens, stripped of emotional depth but filled with the appearance of engagement. This banality of connection normalises a new mode of sociality: always on, always curated, but emotionally muted. The digital banal is not merely aesthetic or cultural—it has political consequences. The invisibility of digital systems hides the labour behind platforms, the environmental cost of devices, and the economic structures that sustain them. This invisibility allows exploitative and extractive systems to flourish unchallenged. Dinnen shows how literature and film can recover the novelty hidden in digital banality, not by dramatising technology itself, but by foregrounding its unspoken effects. Works like *The Social Network* or 'Chronic City' dramatise how code, infrastructure, and mediation shape contemporary life—even when their mechanisms remain unseen. Ultimately, Dinnen's concept invites a different kind of reading—not only of texts, but of everyday life. By paying attention to how the digital banal operates, people can better understand the political, emotional, and ecological stakes of living within systems designed to disappear. In making the unnoticed visible, 'The Digital Banal' opens space for the planned banality of digital language.

Against banality

Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation radically alters how one understands reality, power, and resistance in contemporary life. In William Pawlett's 'Baudrillard Against Banality[227]', the idea of simulation is not merely a media phenomenon but a total transformation

[226] Dinnen, Z. (2018). The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture. Columbia University Press.
[227] Pawlett, W. (2007). Jean Baudrillard. Routledge eBooks. Informa. doi:https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203937365.

in how meaning operates. The world no longer reflects or distorts a stable real; it generates its own hyperreality—an environment of pure signs referring only to other signs. This condition replaces the real with an endless circulation of images, effects, and codes that appear more vivid, seductive, and authoritative than any supposed original. Baudrillard identifies three historical orders of simulacra. The first is the counterfeit, emerging in the Renaissance, where signs still referred to an external real—imitations of nature or divine order. The second is the age of production, shaped by industrial capitalism, where signs reproduce models and become standardised commodities. The third is simulation, in which signs no longer point outward but form closed systems of reference. At this stage, the real disappears. Reality is neither denied nor distorted—it becomes irrelevant. Advertising, media, and branding do not hide the truth; they eliminate the need for it. This hyperreal world is not chaotic but governed by the 'code'—a logic of digital equivalence that reduces meaning to data, circulation, and predictability. Algorithms, genetic codes, financial formulas, and surveillance systems map and reproduce life with extraordinary precision. But their precision is hollow. The code does not clarify reality—it replaces it. Instead of participating in meaning-making, people become data points in a system that simulates choice, freedom, and individuality while neutralising difference. The masses in Baudrillard's theory are not heroic revolutionaries nor manipulated victims. They are indifferent. In their silence and refusal to respond, they exceed representation. They absorb meaning and give nothing back. This passivity is not weakness but a form of defiance—a strategy against the saturation of signs. The public's hyperconformity, irony, and even apathy are not failures to engage but tactics that short-circuit the system's demands for visibility and interaction. In this framework, political action becomes simulacral. Elections simulate choice. Opinion polls simulate discourse. Protest becomes part of the spectacle. Resistance, then, cannot take the form of critique, which is quickly commodified and absorbed. True disruption occurs not through oppositional politics but through symbolic acts that resist translation into value: silence, disappearance, refusal, or excessive gestures that defy utility. Baudrillard's position is not nihilistic but diagnostic. He exposes how the banalisation of reality—its conversion into signs, its absorption into images—erodes meaning while maintaining the illusion of communication. By naming this process, he also gestures toward its limits. In a world where the real is abolished by simulation, the very act of disengaging from the logic of equivalence becomes a form of resistance. The end of the social, for Baudrillard, is not a disappearance but a metamorphosis—one where the possibility of symbolic rupture still flickers within the hyperreal. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra reveals the banality of language in a world where meaning is endlessly recycled. Words no longer refer to reality but only to other signs within closed systems of simulation. Language, once tied to truth or presence, now floats freely, producing the illusion of meaning while concealing its absence. In hyperreality, speech becomes routine, coded, and performative—stripped of symbolic depth. The modern subject does not speak to reveal but to repeat, to circulate linguistic fragments. Communication becomes mechanical, predictable, and fragile—a surface play of familiar signs that replaces genuine expression with the dull hum of simulation.

Banal language

In the chapter 'Chronic Problems, Banal Language, and Contradictory Beliefs' from the book 'Political Language[228]'(2013) Murray Edelman is traicing the persistence of economic and social inequality through centuries of American history. Despite moments of reform and technological progress, the fundamental disparities in wealth, dignity, and autonomy remain

[228] Edelman, M. (2013). Political Language. Elsevier.

intact. What allows this inequality to persist, according to the article, is not only structural rigidity but also the ways language distorts how people perceive and respond to injustice. Inequality is not simply a matter of uneven wealth distribution—it is entangled with chronic social issues like poverty, crime, and lack of opportunity. These problems are often framed in ways that locate the fault within individuals instead of within systems. Poverty becomes a sign of personal failure; crime becomes a pathology of certain communities. This framing obscures how entrenched inequality creates the conditions that breed such outcomes in the first place. The language of social discourse plays a quiet but decisive role. Phrases like 'the disadvantaged' or 'those in need' soften the violence of inequality. Banal expressions strip the urgency from systemic injustice. Rather than naming exploitation or structural violence, the discussion is couched in euphemisms that render inequality a natural, almost inevitable feature of life. This dulls outrage, narrows moral horizons, and allows people to accept contradictions without question. For instance, societies may claim to believe in equality of opportunity while tolerating vast and growing gaps in income and access. They may celebrate meritocracy while ignoring the ways in which starting points are anything but equal. These contradictions are rarely addressed head-on because the discourse surrounding them has been carefully managed through a technocratic and depersonalised vocabulary. The bureaucratic tone makes inequality appear as a policy challenge rather than a moral crisis. From the 17th century to today, inequality in the United States has remained remarkably stable. Even efforts like the War on Poverty did little to disrupt the deeper structures that support economic disparity. This historical inertia signals that inequality is not just a failure of policy, but of imagination—a refusal to think or speak about inequality in terms that compel action. When language fails to convey the human cost of inequality, when it masks contradiction with empty jargon, it does more than obscure reality—it helps sustain it. A change in policy will not be enough unless accompanied by a change in how people talk about inequality. Without naming injustice clearly, it becomes harder to challenge. Confronting inequality demands more than better statistics or efficiency; it requires a moral reawakening. That starts with language. If people continue to describe systemic injustice with phrases that soothe rather than reveal, the contradictions will endure, and the structures that uphold them will remain untouched. The banality of official language lies in its power to evoke strong beliefs while concealing its own emptiness.

Poetics of banality

In 'Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire[229]', Saikat Majumdar explores how colonial modernity transformed the ordinary into an aesthetic and political terrain. Through a wide-ranging study of modernist and postcolonial literature, he shows how banality, boredom, and repetition shaped both the experience and narration of the colonial condition. Far from being passive or empty, the banal becomes a force that reveals and resists imperial hierarchies. Majumdar begins with a key insight: in colonial literature, the mundane is not a failure of imagination but a structure of feeling. Writers like Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, and Amit Chaudhuri depict colonial life as marked by a tension between stasis and longing. Mansfield's characters, shaped by the barren routines of settler life, dream of a fuller experience in the imperial centre. Yet this desire is continually deferred. The everyday rhythms of the colony mirror the political distance from power and cultural recognition. Banality, in this sense, becomes a way to inhabit and narrate exclusion. Drawing from Sianne Ngai's theory of 'noncathartic' affects, Majumdar argues that boredom is not simply dullness but a condition of

[229] Majumdar, S. (2013) Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire. New York: Columbia University Press.

modernity. In modernist fiction, especially in the colonial context, boredom reflects a confrontation with the limits of meaning and transcendence. Joyce's 'Dubliners', for example, turns everyday failures into aesthetic form, where deflated epiphanies reveal both desire and futility. Similarly, Mansfield's prose transforms settler monotony into emotional tension, refusing the narrative closure typical of imperial romance. Majumdar traces the etymology of 'banality' to feudal obligation, highlighting how its meaning evolved from shared use to aesthetic dismissal. This shift parallels the rise of the novel, which in the Enlightenment tradition embraced the ordinary as worthy of narration. Yet modernism turns this gesture inside out. Writers like Woolf critique realist fidelity to detail, not to abandon the banal, but to reimagine it. Banality becomes a site of experimentation, fragmenting traditional narrative and exposing the structures that constrain inner life. In colonial and postcolonial contexts, this transformation takes on a political charge. The monotony of life under empire—its repetitions, delays, and exclusions—becomes the raw material for narrative. Banality is not just aesthetic; it is historical. It registers the slow violence of domination and the quiet resistance of form. Postcolonial writers use the banal to dismantle the grandeur of imperial discourse, showing how modernity's promise of progress was unevenly distributed, often leaving its subjects suspended in waiting. Majumdar's account situates the aesthetics of banality at the intersection of narrative, affect, and empire. The ordinary becomes not a retreat from politics, but a way to register its most intimate effects. The banality of colonial modernity reveals how boredom can become a mode of critique—of both Enlightenment ideals and the imperial realities that betrayed them. The poetics of banality serves as a literary device to expose the flattening effects of official language. By mimicking its empty cadences—its ritualised phrasing, formulaic rhythms, and hollow certainty—writers can reveal how institutional speech masks its own vacuity. To engage banality critically is to make its dead metaphors speak again.

Reproductions of banality

In 'Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life[230]', Alice Yaeger Kaplan examines how fascism infiltrates cultural sensibility not through overt violence alone but through ordinary life, aesthetic forms, and shared emotional codes. Her analysis challenges the dominant interpretation of fascism as a wholly political or ideological phenomenon, arguing instead that it is a structure of feeling—a desire embedded in the everyday. Kaplan shifts the discourse on fascism from abstract political theory to the textures of lived experience. In early 20th-century France, fascism found expression in literary styles, radio broadcasts, films, and even household imagery. These cultural forms were not simply vehicles for fascist content; they were the very grammar through which fascist longing spoke. By focusing on the banal—what is repetitive, familiar, and domestic—Kaplan reveals the power of fascism to disguise itself as normality. She draws attention to how appliances, interiors, sound technologies, and slogans shape a mood of submission and collective identity, not through coercion, but through the comforting repetition of belonging. Kaplan also critiques the intellectual tradition of interpreting fascism primarily through exceptional thinkers. Instead of privileging canonical figures or great ideological texts, she examines the 'middlebrow' literature and cultural forms where fascism becomes intimate. In this context, writers like Céline or Brasillach are not isolated cranks but indicators of a larger cultural disposition. The anti-Semitism in Céline's writing, for instance, functions less as an ideological tract than as a

[230] Alice Yaeger Kaplan (1986). Reproductions of Banality. U of Minnesota Press.

symptom of a mood, a rhythm of resentment that emerges in repetitive, vulgar invective. This banality is not incidental; it is the mechanism through which hatred becomes habitual. The theoretical pivot in Kaplan's book comes from her reworking of the concept of banality itself. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's critique of aestheticised politics, she counters Hannah Arendt's reading of Adolf Eichmann as a hollow bureaucrat embodying the 'banality of evil'. Arendt's formulation, though powerful, risks pathologising fascism as stupidity or lack of imagination. Kaplan instead insists that banality is a deliberate strategy. Through repetition, cliché, and intimacy, fascism normalises exclusion, hierarchy, and violence. Its power lies in the blurring of politics and aesthetics, where listening to a radio broadcast or admiring a furnished apartment becomes participation in a worldview. French fascism, she argues, was particularly shaped by the interplay between modernism and antimodernism. It both embraced modern technology and longed for archaic community. The cult of the leader, the glorification of youth, and the aesthetic of discipline fused mechanisation with nostalgia. Fascist aesthetics thus oscillated between the future and the past, offering a totalising vision that reconciled opposites—mass participation and elite control, innovation, and tradition. Kaplan's intervention lies in showing how ideology is not merely a doctrine, but an affective practice. Fascism persists in rhythms, voices, objects, and dreams. Its survival depends less on belief than on habituation. Recognising fascism means tuning into its quiet repetitions, its appeals to community, its invocation of the maternal and the virile, and its strange comfort. Official discourse does not illuminate; it repeats, reassures, and neutralises. It stabilises appearance, not to reflect truth, but to suppress uncertainty. Its authority lies not in insight but in the dead weight of convention. Language becomes a spectacle of coherence—evocative yet vacant, objective in tone but saturated with institutional bias. Rather than clarify, it obscures; rather than persuade, it performs. As Arendt observed, in political life, being and appearance merge—official language becomes a choreography of sense, not a revelation of meaning.

2.3. The evil of banality

(The routine of speech: How language becomes complicit)

'The most ordinary words are soaked in ideology; banality is often the disguise of power'.

— Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power

The evil of banality

In 'The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking[231]', Elizabeth Minnich offers a sobering meditation on how ordinary people come to commit extraordinary harm. Drawing on philosophical reflections and historical examples, the book is a continuation of Hannah Arendt's claim that the gravest evils may not come from monsters but from people who fail—or refuse—to think. The central thesis is simple yet deeply unsettling: people who are not thinking are capable of anything. This is not an accusation of stupidity or ignorance, but of moral disengagement. Minnich insists that atrocities do not require rage or sadism. They can proceed through the quiet obedience of everyday roles—jobs done efficiently, goals met, targets achieved. It is not evil in its mythic, demonic form, but in its trivial, routinised, bureaucratic

[231] Minnich, E.K. (2024). The Evil of Banality. Rowman & Littlefield.

appearance. The Rwandan genocide is one of Minnich's key examples. A man recalls killing a neighbour, someone whose name he knew, and then casually recounting the event to his wife before going to sleep. He was not driven by personal hatred. He was simply following what had become the rules of his world. The horror lies not in his emotion but in the absence of it—in the smooth integration of violence into the routines of daily life. Minnich examines this pattern across different historical contexts. From Eichmann in Nazi Germany to Eugene de Kock during apartheid South Africa, she shows that evil often operates under the mask of ordinariness. What these individuals had in common was not ideological fervour but a desire to conform, to do their job well, to meet expectations without asking too many questions. One of the most chilling insights is how conventional tools of success and motivation can be turned to destructive ends. Charles Manson adapted self-help principles to control his followers. Eichmann, as David Cesarani notes, was not originally a committed Nazi. He became a key figure in genocide because he was a competent administrator—someone who took pride in organising and solving problems. The more efficient he became, the deeper he embedded himself in the machinery of mass death. What connects these stories is the absence of reflective thinking. Minnich does not suggest that every thoughtless person will commit atrocities. But she argues that large-scale evil requires this very condition: a culture in which questioning is rare, where clichés and norms replace genuine deliberation, and where people defer to rules even when those rules lead to destruction. To resist such evil, then, one must think. Not just technically or strategically, but morally—thinking with others in mind. This kind of thinking is a political act. It refuses the comfort of slogans, the ease of conformity, and the safety of silence. It challenges systems that normalise harm. Minnich's book urges people to cultivate habits of attention and reflection, especially in a world where routine can so easily become complicity. The banality of official language fosters moral disengagement by normalising obedience and masking ethical responsibility beneath neutral, procedural speech. When language becomes a tool for routine rather than reflection, it enables individuals to commit harm without recognising it as such—making atrocity possible through the dullness of unexamined words.

The banality of evil

In 'The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and 'The Final Solution'[232]', Bernard J. Bergen revisits one of the most controversial and misunderstood ideas in twentieth-century political thought. Hannah Arendt's phrase 'the banality of evil', first introduced in her 1963 book 'Eichmann in Jerusalem', ignited public outrage not only for its unsettling tone but for its disturbing implications. Many read her claim as a way of trivialising the Holocaust, but Bergen argues that Arendt's insight was neither reductive nor insensitive. Rather, it was a profound observation about the mechanics of modern evil—its ordinariness, its procedural nature, and above all, its thoughtlessness. The real provocation in Arendt's analysis lies not in diminishing the crimes of the Nazis but in her refusal to see Adolf Eichmann as a monstrous exception. Instead, she presents him as terrifyingly normal—a man whose evil arose not from ideology or sadism, but from a failure to think. Eichmann had abdicated his capacity for judgment, retreating into clichés, bureaucratic roles, and obedience to orders. He was a man so embedded in systems of power and authority that he no longer considered the consequences of his actions. He simply did his job. Arendt's critics were sharply divided. Some interpreted her concept as a dire warning: under the right conditions, any ordinary person might become complicit in atrocity. Others saw it as a moral evasion, reducing the Holocaust to a set of abstract social

[232] Bergen, B. J. (1998) The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution". Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

mechanisms and downplaying the singularity of Jewish suffering. But both camps, Bergen suggests, missed the depth of Arendt's thinking. Her claim was not psychological or historical; it was philosophical. She questioned the very possibility of moral agency in a world where individuals no longer confront their actions through reflective judgment. The real danger Arendt identified was not ideological extremism but moral emptiness—a vacuum at the centre of human behaviour where conscience should reside. Eichmann's banality was not in his crimes but in his language, his manner, his inability to imagine alternatives. For Arendt, thinking is not a luxury; it is a moral imperative. Thoughtlessness, when institutionalised, becomes a mechanism of mass murder. The Final Solution was not only a political catastrophe but an existential crisis for the modern subject. Bergen positions Arendt's idea within her broader philosophical trajectory, stretching from 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' to her unfinished 'The Life of the Mind'. The banality of evil is not a theory of history but a meditation on what it means to act without thinking. Totalitarian systems, in this view, do not merely dominate bodies or impose laws—they annihilate judgment, erode individuality, and reduce people to replaceable functions. Arendt's radical claim is that such systems do not require demonic leaders or zealous followers—just enough people willing to stop asking questions.

Inhuman Thoughts

In 'Inhuman Thoughts: Philosophical Explorations of Posthumanity[233]', Asher Seidel proposes a provocative re-evaluation of what it means to be human by exploring the possibility—and perhaps desirability—of evolving beyond humanity itself. Rather than dwelling on traditional notions of cruelty or moral depravity often associated with 'inhumanity', Seidel uses the term to reflect on non-human or post-human modes of existence, challenging the moral assumptions that typically frame such discussions. These speculative essays invite readers to consider whether the human condition, in all its limitations, should be preserved—or transformed. The idea of improvement animates Seidel's early essays. Observing the intellectual struggles of students, he contemplates the biological and cognitive boundaries of human thought. From this point, he explores theoretical enhancements to perception, reasoning, and emotional life, questioning whether a more refined or extended consciousness might allow people to overcome the incoherence, confusion, and moral dissonance that often define human experience. This approach diverges from conventional philosophical ethics, which tends to assume the permanence of human nature. Instead, Seidel treats the human as mutable, improvable, and perhaps even replaceable. His speculations range from relatively plausible extensions of human life to radically unfamiliar post-human states. Essays such as 'Facing Immortality' consider the consequences of dramatically extended lifespans—not merely the fear of endless boredom, but the moral recalibration such a transformation would require. Others, like 'Parallel Consciousness', imagine minds capable of simultaneously maintaining multiple streams of thought, thereby restructuring identity and the limits of personal autonomy. These imagined futures strain the boundary between philosophical reasoning and science fiction, but Seidel argues that speculative philosophy, even when improbable, serves an essential purpose: pushing the edges of thought. Critics of such work might dismiss it as impractical or escapist. Seidel acknowledges this charge but insists that uselessness is not a flaw. Human societies have always supported intellectual activities—poetry, abstract mathematics, music—that do not produce immediate utility. Speculative philosophy may not guide policy, but it expands the conceptual space in which future ideas and institutions might be born. One of the more

[233] Seidel, A. (2010) Inuman Thoughts: Philosophical Explorations of Posthumanity. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

disturbing essays, 'Alone and Without Love', imagines a post-human society devoid of sexuality, romantic attachment, or the desire for companionship. Seidel offers no easy answers about whether this vision is desirable. Instead, he treats it as an occasion to reflect on what gives current human life its texture—desire, vulnerability, dependence—and how those features could be altered in unexpected ways. Ethical questions recur throughout the collection. If humans become immune to suffering or no longer require social bonds, what becomes of ethics itself? Would moral reasoning disappear in a world where harm is obsolete, or would new forms of value emerge? Seidel suggests that ethics, like humanity, must be subject to revision. To ask 'what is the point of ethics?' is to ask what people aspire to become.

Human dignity violated

In 'Human Dignity Violated', a chapter from the volume 'Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanisation[234]', the contributors argue for a 'negative approach' to the concept of human dignity, emphasising its violation as the most revealing entry point for understanding its meaning and moral weight. Rather than grounding dignity in metaphysical or rationalist principles—as in traditional philosophical accounts—the authors focus on concrete acts of humiliation, degradation, and abuse that provoke strong moral responses. This method roots the concept in real-world experiences and reveals why dignity matters so deeply to people. Human dignity, though often treated as a foundational ethical and legal value, remains conceptually elusive. While philosophical frameworks have linked it to autonomy, rationality, or divine creation, these abstractions can seem disconnected from the emotional and moral force that dignity carries in public life. What gives dignity its urgency is not philosophical clarity but the visceral recognition of its absence—in torture, slavery, poverty, exclusion, or even the small but cruel everyday humiliations inflicted on vulnerable individuals. This is the essence of the negative approach: by analysing the conditions under which people feel their dignity has been violated, one can begin to understand the role dignity plays in human life. Avishai Margalit's idea of a 'decent society'—one that avoids humiliating its members—is foundational here. Dignity is not an isolated trait but a relational and embodied value: it concerns how people are seen, treated, and recognised in their social world. The book's first part explores general forms of dignity violation, such as objectification, degradation, and loss of social recognition. Scholars show how these violations are not just interpersonal but structural, embedded in systems of labour, law, or politics. One key insight is that humiliation can deprive people not only of autonomy but of their symbolic existence—making them feel invisible or worthless. The second part turns to specific practices: torture, rape, poverty, and labour exploitation. These chapters demonstrate how deeply institutionalised some forms of dignity violation are and how abstract ethical principles often fail to account for the lived experience of those subjected to them. For example, rape jurisprudence may frame the crime in terms of consent or bodily integrity, but such categories do not fully capture the profound degradation it entails. Dignity, in this context, helps express the full moral injury. Finally, the book's third part engages critically with the concept itself. Can dignity remain a useful moral category without falling into vagueness or redundancy? Some contributors suggest that a renewed understanding of dignity must incorporate vulnerability, social recognition, and embodied subjectivity, while others call for more precise philosophical definitions. Despite these tensions, there is broad agreement that any future account of dignity must begin with the ways it is violated. The value of this negative approach lies in its refusal to treat dignity as a self-evident or purely theoretical notion. Instead,

[234] Stoecker, R. (ed.) (2011) Human Dignity Violated, in Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization: Human Dignity Violated. Dordrecht: Springer.

it makes the moral reality of degradation central. Dignity matters because people know what it feels like to be stripped of it.

Non-banality of evil

While modern totalitarianism is often associated with the horrors of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, Steven Saxonberg's comparative analysis broadens this framework by tracing totalitarian patterns back to the pre-modern era. In 'Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil[235]', Saxonberg draws on historical case studies to challenge two prevailing assumptions: that totalitarianism is an exclusively modern phenomenon, and that those who commit evil under such regimes do so out of bureaucratic indifference, echoing Hannah Arendt's thesis of the 'banality of evil'. Instead, Saxonberg argues that both modern and pre-modern forms of totalitarianism rely on deeply ideological structures and active participation in repression—not passive obedience. The Spanish Inquisition exemplifies a pre-modern totalitarian system. Unlike France's papal inquisition, which remained largely under ecclesiastical control, the Spanish version became integrated into the machinery of state-building. It demanded not only outward conformity but inward conviction. Heretics were not merely punished for public disobedience but for incorrect belief, monitored and coerced through systematic surveillance, anonymous accusations, and performative rituals of piety. In Saxonberg's view, the Inquisition's ambition to control thought and conscience places it squarely within the totalitarian tradition. The book's key insight is that totalitarianism should not be defined by its modern tools—mass media, industrial surveillance, or single-party states—but by its ambition to monopolise truth and enforce ideological purity. Saxonberg lays out four criteria to identify totalitarian regimes across eras: a totalising ideology, a structure of enforcement, a politicised belief system, and the use of fear as a mechanism of control. This broader conceptualisation allows for meaningful comparisons between the Inquisition and modern regimes like Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. Each, though historically distinct, shares the core aspiration of molding society through coercion and ideological conformity. Saxonberg's comparative method highlights why some states evolve into totalitarian regimes while others do not. Central to his argument is the role of state-building. Newly unified or unstable states—like post-Reconquista Spain or interwar Germany—often face crises of legitimacy. In such conditions, totalitarianism becomes a strategy for creating social cohesion by enforcing ideological unity and identifying internal enemies. The Spanish monarchy relied on the Inquisition to forge a Catholic national identity, while Nazi Germany weaponised antisemitic ideology to unify a fractured populace. By contrast, more established states like France and Sweden, with longer histories of governance and political inclusion, had less need to rely on coercive ideology. Their political systems, however flawed, had mechanisms that absorbed dissent without turning to repression. Saxonberg also critiques the explanatory power of cultural theories, such as those that locate German totalitarianism in Lutheran authoritarianism or France's resistance to it in Enlightenment liberalism. Such narratives, he argues, fail to account for the fact that Sweden, arguably more Lutheran and hierarchical than Germany, developed a democratic tradition. The Sonderweg theory, which suggests Germany's unique historical trajectory predisposed it to authoritarianism, also falters when compared to Spain, whose authoritarian past did not follow the same path. Instead, Saxonberg suggests that institutional configurations, especially the inclusivity or exclusivity of state-building, play a more decisive role than national character or religious heritage. The book also reconsiders Arendt's notion of evil as banal, particularly in bureaucratic systems where individuals follow

[235] Saxonberg, S. (2023) Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, Springer.

orders without moral reflection. Saxonberg argues that many perpetrators in both pre-modern and modern totalitarian systems were not passive cogs but willing agents, actively participating in, and even expanding the machinery of repression. Whether inquisitors in Spain or Gestapo officers in Germany, these individuals often displayed ideological zeal, creative cruelty, and personal ambition. Their evil, in other words, was anything but banal—it was deliberate and rationalised within a coherent, if twisted, worldview. By tracing continuities across time and regimes, Saxonberg builds a robust theory of totalitarianism that is both historically grounded and flexible enough to account for diverse contexts. His analysis does not flatten the differences between religious and secular regimes, or between modern and pre-modern institutions, but rather identifies a shared structure of ideological totalism that transcends specific epochs. He concludes that totalitarianism is not merely a political form but a moral disorder—a regime-wide effort to annihilate dissent, individuality, and complexity in favour of an artificial unity imposed by fear and dogma. Through its comparative depth and theoretical rigor, 'Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism, and the Non-Banality of Evil' complicates simplistic narratives of modernity and evil. It offers a powerful reminder that the capacity for ideological violence is not confined to any one period or system but recurs wherever power seeks to dominate the human soul. Totalitarianism is not a product of modernity; it is a method of governance that transcends eras, uniting state power and ideological conformity in a brutal symphony of enforced belief.

Evilness

Steven Saxonberg argues that totalitarian regimes, particularly those formed during periods of political instability, often rely on deliberately orchestrated acts of evil to consolidate their power and legitimacy. These acts are not incidental but strategically deployed against targeted groups framed as existential threats. Drawing from historical examples such as Nazi Germany and the Spanish Inquisition, Saxonberg challenges the notion that evil under totalitarianism is banal or exclusive to modernity. Instead, he presents a theory in which state-building efforts frequently weaponise ideological purity and societal fear to achieve unity and obedience. Traditional explanations often tie atrocities to modern bureaucratic or technological systems. Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, emphasised how modern rationality enabled the Holocaust to function as an efficient killing machine. Yet, as Saxonberg points out, much of the violence committed during the Holocaust was not industrial but personal—shootings by police and soldiers, starvation, and neglect. Moreover, evil in history is not limited to modern examples. In ancient literature like Homer's 'Iliad', Agamemnon openly calls for the extermination of the Trojan people, even unborn children. These accounts suggest that collective acts of evil have deeper political and sociological roots, predating the modern era. Saxonberg defines evil not as a theological category, but in secular, sociopolitical terms. Drawing on the work of scholars like Waller, he frames evil as the intentional and systematic infliction of suffering on defenceless victims, sanctioned by political or religious authorities. This definition broadens the scope of analysis to include not only genocide but also cultural erasure, forced conversions, and exclusionary state practices that devastate communities. Spain's Inquisition, for example, did not exterminate Jews and Muslims en masse but forcibly converted, expelled, and erased their cultures—clearly qualifying as a form of state-sponsored evil under this lens. At the heart of Saxonberg's thesis is the idea that totalitarian regimes are often born from political fragility. New states lacking historical legitimacy must invent cohesive narratives and identities. They do this by identifying outgroups, dehumanising them, and presenting them as threats to the national fabric. Acts of collective violence become not only tolerated but expected, offering the majority a sense of unity and purpose. The state becomes

protector and purifier, and participation in violence is framed as a duty rather than a crime. Cultural prejudices play an enabling role in this process, but Saxonberg insists they are insufficient causes on their own. Spain and Germany, both deeply unstable at key historical moments, activated latent prejudices to rally support for state-building projects. France and Sweden, by contrast, were more politically established and secure, making the instrumental use of ideology and fear less urgent and less effective. In this view, evil is not the product of faceless bureaucrats or the machinery of modernity alone, but a strategic tool used by fragile regimes to manufacture legitimacy and obedience. Rather than being banal, it is methodical, deliberate, and deeply political—rooted in the very architecture of state-building. 'Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil' explores how totalitarian regimes mobilise societies to commit atrocities by crafting a sense of existential threat around targeted outgroups. The central claim is that such acts of 'evil' are most likely when the state itself is fragile or newly formed, seeking legitimacy through unifying ideologies. Nazi Germany exemplifies this pattern, as the regime constructed a political religion that dehumanised Jews and depicted them as enemies of the nation, drawing heavily on older anti-Semitic religious traditions and repackaging them as pseudo-scientific racial theories. The chapter critiques the simplistic notion that perpetrators of genocide are merely conformists or passive agents. It shows that many participants had long careers shaped by violence and authoritarian ideology. Individuals like Rudolf Höss, who commanded Auschwitz, had already been part of extremist paramilitary groups and embraced Nazi ideology wholeheartedly. Even 'desk murderers' like Alfred Meyer were not neutral administrators but ideologically committed actors who shaped and directed extermination policies. Religious and regional differences also played a role. In Austria, for instance, pan-Germanic nationalism and Catholic anti-Semitism merged to form an especially aggressive racial ideology. In contrast, Protestant Germany’s nationalism was less expansionist, though still vulnerable to the Nazis’ racial propaganda. Saxonberg argues that such nuances are essential for understanding the mechanisms of complicity. Ultimately, the Nazi state succeeded in legitimising genocide not through brute force alone, but through a complex system of indoctrination, dehumanisation, and ideological manipulation. Perpetrators believed in the moral necessity of their actions, and their sense of duty was rooted in the perceived legitimacy of the regime. The key to understanding their actions lies not in reducing them to mindless functionaries, but in acknowledging how belief, authority, and moral framing converge in totalitarian systems. 'Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil' offers a sobering reassessment of how modern states can create the conditions for ordinary people to commit extraordinary crimes—not despite their humanity, but by reconfiguring it around the moral logic of the state’s survival.

3. ANTI-LANGUAGE

3.1. Anti-language

(Codes of defiance: Cant, argot, and the language of resistance)

'Language is not merely a tool of communication, but a battlefield where the dominant and the marginal contest the power to define'.

— Norman Fairclough, Language and Power

'The creation of anti-language is the creation of a new social reality, one that denies the legitimacy of dominant norms'.

— James Paul Gee, An Introduction to Discourse Analysis

Speech as a disguise

Cant began as the whining song of beggars and ended as the cold chant of bureaucrats, priests, and politicians. Its etymology mirrors this trajectory. From the Latin 'cantare', 'to sing', and Old French 'chanter', cant once evoked the voice raised not in joy but in strategy—song as manipulation. In English, the earliest use of 'cant' (mid-1500s) described the rehearsed speech of the beggar. By the 1600s, it came to mean the secret jargon of thieves and vagabonds. Over time, it was used to describe any stylised, insincere, or exclusionary speech—a language not to reveal, but to conceal. Cant is not a dialect but a disguise. Historically, cant was never simply slang. As John S. Farmer noted in the 19th century, slang may be irreverent and informal, but cant is more enduring, more closed, and more performative. It belongs to those who need not just to name but to obscure: criminal underworlds, religious sects, political ideologues, even professionals. It survives not just through repetition but through its power to exclude, to bind insiders together by keeping outsiders out. Linguistically, cant exists in the shadow of another term: 'argot'. A French word for the secret codes of beggars and thieves, argot carries a similar spirit. Victor Hugo famously called it 'the language of darkness'. While cant typically describes the tone or posture of speech—its hypocrisy or self-righteousness—argot tends to refer to concrete vocabulary, the actual terms swapped in and out to keep the meaning hidden. Both, however, are languages of disguise. The hybrid speech of marginalised groups has always flourished on society's edge. And yet, as language evolves, so too does cant's home. What once belonged to beggars now flourishes in corporate slogans, political campaigns, and algorithmic 'engagement'. Cant today is not limited to the gutters but thrives in headlines and mission statements, often more hollow than sinister. In professional settings, cant takes on a different tone—part ritual, part code. Medical professionals, for instance, use abbreviations, acronyms, and in-group slang to accelerate communication and maintain authority. Though this language is not always meant to deceive, it nonetheless creates a boundary between the expert and the layperson. In the hands of marketers or consultants, cant becomes its own industry: a style of speaking designed not to communicate but to suggest competence, energy, or synergy—terms that glitter without grounding. Cant, then, is not just a historical curiosity but a living mode of speech. It is not defined by content but by function: speech that signals belonging, or speech that hides. Sometimes both. Whether spoken by beggars, bureaucrats, or brands, cant reveals the double face of language—its ability to connect and to obscure, to share and to segregate.

'Anti-societies'

Anti-societies are social groups that form in deliberate contrast to the dominant order, creating alternative structures of meaning, value, and belonging. Central to their cohesion is language—not simply as a tool of communication but as a mechanism for resistance. Michael Halliday coined the term 'anti-language' to describe the distinct linguistic systems of such groups. These languages go beyond slang or dialect; they rework the dominant tongue to construct new realities. Through relexicalisation, metaphor, inversion, and overlexicalisation, anti-societies forge vocabularies that encode opposition and define group boundaries. Their survival depends not only on physical separation or marginality, but on the creation of an alternative reality—and at the heart of this process is anti-language. Unlike ordinary dialects or

specialised jargon, anti-languages are not mother tongues inherited within a culture. They are deliberately forged by groups that reject the mainstream, functioning as symbolic tools of resistance and resocialisation. Within an anti-society, anti-language does more than conceal meaning; it reconstructs reality from within the margins. This reconstruction depends on what Berger and Luckmann call a 'plausibility structure'—a social base where transformation is made credible through affective ties with significant others. In anti-societies, identity is not passively received but actively produced through linguistic ritual. Language here is heavily interpersonal, often formalised, and used to reinforce shared defiance. The new self is shaped not just through belief, but through daily conversation that asserts the legitimacy of the counter-reality. Anti-language is unique in that it is born entirely within opposition. Religious converts, for instance, adopt a new worldview, but one already normalised within an existing group. An anti-society, by contrast, creates a linguistic system that does not exist outside its defiant context. This is not a shift from one norm to another—it is the production of norms in tension with society itself. Tension, not distance, defines the boundary between society and anti-society. Anti-languages, like Grypsera or Polari, are clearly derived from dominant languages but serve different functions, reconfiguring familiar structures to reflect new social meanings. Individuals may move between society and anti-society, occupying intermediate spaces. As studies of criminal argot in Bengal show, language use varies across subgroups—criminals, near-criminals, and even students—each engaging differently with the anti-society's speech. This illustrates a spectrum of affiliation, where anti-language mediates shifting identities and loyalties. Ultimately, anti-language is inseparable from anti-society. It is the semiotic expression of an alternative order, born not of separation alone, but of conflict and contestation. Just as anti-societies resist dominant structures, anti-languages resist dominant meanings. They are not deviations from the norm, but parallel realities forged in opposition—speaking a world that would otherwise remain unheard. Whether subversive or institutional, the creation of parallel languages underscores a basic truth: language is power. Anti-societies use it not just to hide, but to endure, to define, and to defy.

Anti-languages

In his groundbreaking essay 'Anti-Languages[236]', M.A.K. Halliday explores how marginalised or oppositional groups create distinct linguistic systems that function not just to conceal meaning from outsiders, but to construct entirely alternative social realities. These systems, called anti-languages, emerge within what Halliday calls 'anti-societies'—communities formed in resistance to dominant social norms. Unlike dialects or sociolects, anti-languages are more than linguistic variation; they reframe experience, realign values, and sustain group cohesion through creative relexicalisation and metaphor. Halliday identifies several defining characteristics of anti-languages. Chief among them is relexicalisation: the substitution of existing vocabulary with novel terms for familiar concepts, especially those central to the life of the anti-society. For instance, Elizabethan criminals had their own term for a house that received stolen goods ('stalling-ken') or for teeth ('crashing-cheats'), just as modern prison argots or gang slang invent words for guards, weapons, or drugs. This continuous reinvention both preserves secrecy and enacts symbolic resistance. A second key feature is overlexicalisation—the creation of multiple synonymous terms for the same referent. Far from redundancy, this richness reflects the group's social preoccupations and internal hierarchies. The multiplicity of expressions surrounding key themes such as surveillance, betrayal, or violence often mirrors the group's lived anxieties and structures of power. Anti-languages also

[236] Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). "Anti-Languages." In 'Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning', London: Edward Arnold.

display a marked tendency toward metaphor and symbolic substitution. The language becomes a ritualised medium in which reality is re-coded. Its use is performative: to speak the anti-language is to occupy a position within the anti-society. In Polish prison slang, for instance, knowing and using the proper terms reflects one's place in the social hierarchy. Linguistic competence thus becomes synonymous with social survival. Halliday argues that these languages do not merely communicate an alternative worldview—they construct it. Drawing on the sociological theory of Berger and Luckmann, he proposes that anti-languages play an active role in the ongoing construction of reality. Through daily conversation, rituals, and storytelling, members of the anti-society reinforce the symbolic boundaries of their world. Anti-language becomes a form of world-building, a defence against marginalisation and assimilation. Yet anti-languages are not just tools of resistance; they are also susceptible to erosion. As the dominant culture absorbs their lexicon or neutralises their meanings, anti-languages must evolve. Their vitality depends on innovation and the constant re-creation of distinctiveness. Fictional examples, like the 'nadsat' speech of Alex and his gang in Anthony Burgess's 'A Clockwork Orange', illustrate this dynamic. At first, 'nadsat' empowers the group to carve out a violent subculture, but it ultimately fails to resist the state's corrective apparatus. What Halliday's theory ultimately reveals is that anti-languages lie at the extreme end of a broader continuum of linguistic variation. They dramatise the sociolinguistic principle that all language is implicated in power, identity, and exclusion. In everyday speech, subtle linguistic choices already demarcate class, status, and affiliation. Anti-languages magnify these tendencies, offering an intensified glimpse into the mechanics of linguistic resistance. The study of anti-languages shows how humans use language not only to describe the world but to resist, transform, and reimagine it. These languages articulate the aspirations, fears, and boundaries of their speakers, serving both as shields and as weapons in cultural conflict. As Halliday suggests, they are not aberrations, but exemplary of language's inherent plasticity and its entanglement with social structure and symbolic power.

Fin de Siècle languages

In her article 'Babel: Hermetic Languages, Universal Languages, and Anti-Languages in Fin de Siècle Parisian Culture[237]', Natasha Staller explores how late 19th-century Paris was consumed by a profound linguistic anxiety, one that permeated not only intellectual circles but also the visual arts. The period's artists and thinkers were confronted with a Babel-like fragmentation of meaning and language. In response, they turned to cryptographic systems, constructed universal languages, and subversive anti-languages—not merely as tools of communication, but as strategies of critique, mysticism, and identity formation. Staller maps out three major linguistic phenomena—hermetic, universal, and anti-languages—and shows how they resonated with Symbolist art. Hermetic languages, such as military codes or private systems devised by occult societies, mirrored the Symbolist artists' own interest in secrecy and layered meaning. These were not simply techniques of encryption, but expressions of a deeper desire to transcend ordinary perception. Works by artists like Seurat or Gauguin are riddled with enigmatic forms and hidden references, resembling visual ciphers. The surface gives way to a reality withheld, where interpretation becomes an act of initiation. Alongside hermetic codes, Staller examines the rise of universal languages like Volapük and Esperanto, invented with utopian aims of erasing national divisions and fostering peace through linguistic unity. But this drive for universality was met with ambivalence. Artists feared that the simplification of language might flatten the complexities of experience. Universal languages, despite their lofty

[237] Staller, N. (1994) Babel: Hermetic Languages, Universal Languages, and Anti-Languages in Fin de Siècle Parisian Culture, The Art Bulletin, 76(2), pp. 331–354.

ideals, were seen by some as mechanisms of control, imposing artificial clarity where ambiguity was more truthful. Symbolist art responded not with simplification, but with deliberate complexity—a rejection of the idea that language could ever fully capture the world. The most radical response came in the form of anti-languages—linguistic systems born out of marginality and resistance. In fin de siècle Paris, 'argot', the slang of the criminal underworld, was one such form. These languages inverted dominant norms, creating a coded resistance to the bourgeois order. Staller argues that Symbolist artists adopted a similar strategy. Their fragmented, dreamlike works mirrored the structure of anti-languages: exclusionary, polysemous, and resistant to institutional interpretation. The rejection of linear narrative, the embrace of obscurity, and the fascination with silence itself all placed Symbolist art in direct conversation with the subversive potential of anti-language. Staller's broader claim is that artists at the fin de siècle were not merely reacting to linguistic crises but participating in them, reshaping language, and meaning through formal innovation. Seurat's 'La Grande Jatte', for example, is interpreted not just as a composition of dots but as a meditation on the instability of meaning—where forms morph and defy expectations, and a parasol might double as a moon. Like the shifting lexicon of an anti-language, the visual field becomes a space where no sign is fixed, and every object might carry multiple truths. The Symbolists' embrace of fractured language was less a descent into chaos than a deliberate refusal to accept imposed clarity. Their art, like the anti-languages they paralleled, was a protest simplification—a refusal to forget that language, in all its strangeness, is both a prison and a key.

Secret anti-languages

David Robson's article 'The Secret 'Anti-Languages' You're Not Supposed to Know[238]' explores how clandestine linguistic codes have evolved throughout history as both a form of resistance and a way to strengthen internal bonds. These anti-languages—spoken by criminals, prisoners, LGBTQ+ communities, or digital subcultures—represent more than just slang. They are systems of speech designed to exclude outsiders and build identity among insiders, often functioning as survival tools within oppressive or surveilled societies. The foundation of anti-language lies in relexicalisation: altering vocabulary while maintaining the grammatical structure of the base language. This transformation creates coded versions of familiar speech. For example, in the 16th-century Thieves' Cant, 'Rome' was London, 'bounge' a purse, and 'bowsing ken' an alehouse. This allowed criminals to speak openly in public while remaining incomprehensible to authorities. Such languages are often rich in metaphor, metaphorical displacements, and creative distortion—making them both poetic and subversive. Robson emphasises that anti-languages do not emerge arbitrarily but from necessity. Their function is twofold: secrecy and solidarity. In contexts of surveillance or criminalisation, speaking openly is dangerous. The British LGBTQ+ community once used Polari to navigate public life without exposure. Phrases like 'vada the bona omi' ('look at the handsome man') disguised queer identity within performative playfulness. Similarly, Kolkata's criminal underworld boasts over forty different terms for 'police', revealing both the pressure to evade detection and the cultural importance of linguistic finesse. The depth of these speech forms often creates internal hierarchies. In Polish prisons, mastering Grypserka—the prison anti-language—confers status, while ignorance invites scorn. Language, in this context, becomes a gatekeeping mechanism:

[238] Robson, D. (n.d.). The secret 'anti-languages' you're not supposed to know. [online] www.bbc.com. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160211-the-secret-anti-languages-youre-not-supposed-to-know.

to speak is to belong. Robson's research makes clear that anti-languages are not just communication tools but instruments of social structure. Contemporary equivalents extend beyond the street into digital culture. Censorship and algorithmic suppression have birthed internet anti-languages, particularly around sensitive topics such as sex work or political dissent. On forums and encrypted platforms, coded euphemisms like 'the hobby' or 'trolling' ensure evasion of filters. The pace of change online creates a fluid, adaptive lexicon that remains just out of reach of automated surveillance. In essence, today's digital anti-languages mimic the adaptability and resistance of their historical forebears. Cultural products often reimagine these languages as literary or artistic symbols. Anthony Burgess's 'A Clockwork Orange' deploys 'Nadsat', an invented anti-language, to immerse readers in the deviant psyche of its protagonist. David Bowie referenced Nadsat in his lyrics, blending its rebellious aura with another anti-language—Polari. Films like 'Idiocracy' extrapolate this to absurd extremes, imagining degraded future slangs as critiques of social decay. What emerges from Robson's article is a portrait of language as not merely a system of signs but a cultural artefact of struggle and creativity. Anti-languages resist hegemony by reimagining the possible within speech. From Elizabethan thieves to online activists, these secret tongues continue to shape and shade the world's dominant forms of communication.

Nadsat

In 'A Clockwork Orange', Anthony Burgess creates more than a dystopian future of ultra-violence and state control—he constructs an entire linguistic world through the invention of 'nadsat', a hybrid teenage argot used by Alex and his gang. As Liberty Kohn argues in his analysis 'Antilanguage and the 'Gentleman's Goloss[239]', 'nadsat' functions not merely as slang but as what M.A.K. Halliday terms an 'antilanguage'—a linguistic system that sustains the identity, hierarchy, and worldview of a subculture opposed to dominant norms. It provides both a code of resistance and a social tool for constructing internal order, yet ultimately reveals its limits when pitted against the larger forces of societal reintegration. The antilanguage emerges within 'antisocieties'—communities defined by their resistance to the prevailing order. Nadsat, a melange of Russian, English, and invented idioms, fits this model exactly. It defines the gang's reality, marking inclusion and establishing boundaries. Mastery of its lexicon and style is a prerequisite for belonging, and its fluent use signals status and control. Alex, the novel's narrator and leader, manipulates nadsat with remarkable dexterity, which reinforces his authority over his droogs and enables him to deceive adults, including police officers and potential victims. His fluency lets him shift registers—from gang speak to a polished, middle-class tone—when needed to mask his intentions or gain trust. Language becomes a performance of power. For Alex, linguistic agility equals dominance. His gang operates less through ideology than through shared rhythms of speech, where irony, metaphor, and stylised violence form the basis of communication. When Dim, a fellow droog, fails to properly grasp or use nadsat's ironic codes, he reveals a lack of verbal intelligence and social finesse. This failure distances him from Alex, who physically punishes him, enforcing a pecking order through linguistic competence. The gang's social structure is, in part, a linguistic hierarchy. However, nadsat does not remain static. In prison, Alex is exposed to other youth groups whose speech patterns challenge his assumptions of linguistic superiority. His dialect, once an assertion of dominance, is merely one variant among many. This moment is crucial—it underscores that language, even within antisocieties, is unstable and competitive. Alex's status deteriorates as his speech no longer commands power. He is implicated in a crime by fellow inmates, a result

[239] Kohn, L. (n.d.) Antilanguage and the 'Gentleman's Goloss': Power, Style, and Linguistic Identity in A Clockwork Orange*. University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

not only of shifting alliances but of the collapse of his linguistic authority in unfamiliar social contexts. The twenty-first chapter of the British edition marks a turning point. As Alex matures and contemplates a future outside violence, nadsat recedes from his vocabulary. He visits Pete, a former droog now fully reintegrated into society, who speaks in standard English and views their past argot with condescension. Nadsat, once a weapon and shield, is now meaningless outside the context that birthed it. Its abandonment signals Alex's transformation and surrender to a normalised adult role. This trajectory mirrors Halliday's insight that while antilanguages are potent forms of resistance, they are limited by their dependency on opposition. Once the opposition is removed—either through suppression or integration—the antilanguage loses its function. In 'A Clockwork Orange', nadsat represents youthful rebellion, but it cannot sustain identity beyond that stage. Its brilliance lies in its artificiality, but this same artificiality renders it fragile. Burgess thus stages a critique of linguistic resistance itself. While nadsat empowers Alex, it also imprisons him within a juvenile worldview. The transition from violent rebellion to quiet conformity is marked linguistically: from creative slang to conventional speech. Language in the novel is not just a reflection of social reality; it actively constructs it. Alex's linguistic shift parallels a shift in being. He is no longer a 'droog' but a man considering marriage, children, and employment. Ultimately, Kohn's reading of 'A Clockwork Orange' positions nadsat as a textbook case of antilanguage—a vibrant, coded system of belonging and rebellion, doomed to obsolescence in the face of societal integration. As powerful as linguistic resistance may be, Burgess shows that language alone cannot escape the gravitational pull of social norms. The failure of nadsat underscores the paradox at the heart of all antilanguages: their vitality depends on the very society they aim to reject.

Heretical discourse

In her article 'The Anti-Language of Feminist and Queer Activism: Linguistic Norm-Breaking and Heretical Discourse in Croatia[240]', Roswitha Kersten-Pejanić explores how feminist and queer communities in Croatia strategically use language to resist deeply rooted androcentric norms. Croatian, like other Slavic languages, operates with strict gender agreement rules, reinforcing binary distinctions that activists seek to disrupt. Through the creation of what she calls a 'heretical discourse', these groups not only subvert existing grammatical structures but also reimagine the possibilities of self-representation and inclusion. Language is not neutral. It often serves as a mirror of dominant ideologies, embedding social hierarchies in its very grammar. In Croatian, the default masculine form is regularly used to denote mixed or unspecified groups. However, research consistently shows that listeners interpret these generic forms as male-specific, revealing the inadequacy of supposedly universal expressions. This issue becomes particularly acute in feminist and queer contexts, where the aim is to dismantle rigid gender binaries, not reinforce them. Kersten-Pejanić highlights the problem with false generics—masculine terms that claim inclusivity but evoke male imagery—and the ways Croatian feminists and queer activists respond. Rather than merely calling out these norms, they experiment with the language itself, challenging the gendered structure of pronouns, titles, and verbal forms. For example, feminine professional titles such as 'profesorica' or 'ravnateljica' have become common in Croatia but are still debated in neighbouring countries like Serbia. The act of naming thus becomes political; every suffix signals inclusion or erasure, defiance, or submission. Grammatical gender in Croatian functions as a form of linguistic policing. Sentences must conform to gender agreement, forcing speakers to choose a side even when they seek neutrality. Attempts to refer to women or nonbinary individuals using masculine forms

[240] Kersten-Pejanić, R. (n.d.) The Anti-Language of Feminist and Queer Activism: Linguistic Norm-Breaking and Heretical Discourse in Croatia*, CAS SEE, University of Rijeka.

end up excluding them; attempts to craft inclusive alternatives often clash with grammatical conventions. Yet activists persist, using irony, neologisms, repetition, and visual play to expand what is sayable and imaginable. These norm-breaking practices go beyond the surface level of speech—they constitute what M.A.K. Halliday would call an 'anti-language': a form of resistance coded into expression. This linguistic resistance does not just protest exclusion; it performs a new kind of identity politics. Activists create language that refuses to recognise patriarchy as the default and instead proposes a pluralistic grammar of recognition. Kersten-Pejanić's study places this Croatian activism within a broader global conversation about language and gender but remains sensitive to local specificities. Croatian's grammatical rigidity makes reform difficult, but also forces a confrontation with the ideological implications of every sentence. In breaking the rules, feminist and queer speakers reveal how language functions as a site of power—and a field of struggle. Through these heretical discourses, activists shape not just how people speak, but how they imagine themselves and others. Their linguistic creativity is a form of cultural rebellion, a refusal to be spoken for by a system that does not recognise them.

The argot of premillennialism

In his article 'Apocalypticism in America: The Argot of Premillennialism in Popular Culture[241]' (1988), Randall Balmer traces the vocabulary, symbolism, and cultural force of American apocalyptic thought, particularly the branch known as premillennialism. This form of eschatology centres on the belief that Christ will return before a literal thousand-year reign, initiating divine judgment and a catastrophic break with history. Balmer reveals how this worldview has not only shaped religious subcultures but has also spilled into literature, media, and political discourse through its distinct lexicon and imagery. Premillennialism emerged as a reaction to Enlightenment optimism and postmillennial reformism. Where postmillennialism once thrived during periods like the Great Awakening—confident in the eventual perfectibility of society—premillennialism flourished amid growing social disillusionment in the 19th century. Figures like William Miller, who predicted Christ's return in the 1840s, and Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, brought biblical prophecy to the forefront of American public life. Although their specific predictions failed, the apocalyptic mindset endured, evolving into movements like Seventh-day Adventism and shaping later evangelical thinking. The language of premillennialism is filled with dramatic signifiers: the Rapture, the Tribulation, the Antichrist, the mark of the beast. These terms function not only as theological ideas but also as a shared argot among believers, distinguishing insiders from outsiders and reinforcing a particular worldview. Balmer shows how this language is embedded in both sacred and popular texts. The 'Scofield Reference Bible' (1909) was central in spreading dispensational theology, teaching that history unfolds in divine epochs, each with its own prophetic script. Meanwhile, cultural works like Hal Lindsey's 'The Late Great Planet Earth' and the film 'A Thief in the Night' visualised the end times with cinematic urgency. This apocalyptic media shaped the imagination of entire evangelical generations, often emphasising fear, urgency, and divine retribution. Balmer also highlights the sociological function of premillennial rhetoric. In evangelical subcultures, it operates as a tool of evangelism—shocking people into repentance—but also as a form of protest perceived moral decay and institutional corruption. Figures like Dwight Moody and Billy Graham wielded apocalyptic messages to critique modern society while calling for personal salvation. Yet even as these movements preach withdrawal from a fallen world, they often become entangled in the very structures they critique. Balmer notes that

[241] Balmer, R. (1988) Apocalypticism in America: The Argot of Premillennialism in Popular Culture, Prospects, 13, pp. 417–433.

despite the anti-world posture of premillennialism, it increasingly overlaps with cultural activism, particularly in the rise of the religious right, where judgmental language coexists with political engagement. Premillennialism's power lies in its ability to adapt—to retain its symbolic vocabulary while shifting its narrative strategy. Whether through pyramidal churches like Neal Frisby's Capstone Ministry or mass-market paperbacks warning of impending doom, the argot of the apocalypse remains a dynamic force. Balmer's essay shows that American culture has repeatedly turned to this language in times of crisis, finding in it both judgment and hope, destruction, and renewal.

3.2. Jargon

(Fluency and exclusion: The hidden grammar of power)

'Jargon is the verbal equivalent of a secret handshake: it defines who is in and who is out'.

— Richard Sennett, The Culture of the New Capitalism

Words that draw borders

Jargon is language that draws borders. It identifies who belongs and who does not, who speaks fluently and who fumbles, who commands the discourse and who must ask for clarification. Originally derived from the Old French word for bird chatter, jargon has always carried an undertone of noise, of speech that is meaningful only to those who understand its signals. Its lineage connects it to both the rhythm of insider belonging and the incoherence of exclusion. In modern usage, jargon refers to the specialised vocabulary used by specific professions, trades, disciplines, or social groups. It is designed for speed, efficiency, and precision within its field. While these terms facilitate high-speed communication between experts, they often render outsiders mute. Every discipline produces its own coded language, its own shorthand for accumulated knowledge. The terms are not chosen at random; they evolve with the field, shaped by necessity and the need for efficiency. Yet they also signal a kind of territoriality. Mastery of jargon is mastery of the space it defines. Jargon is more than vocabulary—it is a filter. Used appropriately, it grants access and affirms belonging. Misused, it exposes the outsider. This performative function gives jargon its power and danger. In job interviews, classrooms, conferences, and even casual professional interactions, fluency in jargon can substitute for deeper knowledge. A person who speaks the lingo is presumed to 'get it', regardless of whether they do. But this linguistic efficiency comes at a cost. For those outside the circle, jargon can become a wall. When a doctor rattles off a diagnosis without translation, when legal terms cloud an already complex contract, or when an academic cloaks a simple idea in convoluted terminology, jargon shifts from communication to obfuscation. Critics of such practices call for plain language initiatives, urging professionals to speak in accessible terms, especially when the audience lacks specialised training. Yet the critique of jargon is not new. In 1782, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac observed that each science, in its effort to define and control knowledge, invents its own vocabulary. He warned that these terms often arise haphazardly and argued for a more thoughtful creation of technical language. His concern was not just about comprehension—it was about clarity, truth, and the risk of hiding ignorance behind complex terms. Still, jargon persists because it does more than describe; it creates identity. It is a social tool, a linguistic performance, a badge. In every industry or academic field, jargon signals that one belongs, that one has paid dues, studied the manuals, learnt the rules. For newcomers, adopting the jargon is part of assimilation. For veterans, it is part of

maintaining authority. In the end, jargon reminds us that language is never neutral. Words serve purposes beyond meaning: they form alliances, stake claims, and exclude intruders. The challenge is to recognise when jargon builds bridges and when it builds walls. Knowing when to speak it—and when to set it aside—is the true mark of fluency.

The essence of jargon

Alice Becker-Ho's 'The Essence of Jargon[242]' explores how the language of the dangerous classes, often dismissed as slang or cant, constitutes not only a means of communication but also a structure of resistance and identity. For Becker-Ho, jargon is not simply a technical vocabulary but a coded, poetic, and tactical language developed within communities that exist on the margins of legality, capitalism, and institutional control. Her work traces the genealogy of this secret speech, formed in the underworld of thieves, beggars, gypsies, and rebels—those who reject the constraints of wage labour and state surveillance. Jargon, in this sense, is neither decorative nor merely cryptic. It is born from necessity. Unlike the language of institutions—polished, abstract, and intentionally transparent—jargon cultivates opacity. It is designed to exclude the uninitiated, to guard the group, to deceive the enemy. It divides the world between insiders and outsiders. The distinction is not based on class position alone, but on shared rejection: refusal to play by the rules of normal society. Jargon thus serves as both shelter and sword—a form of solidarity and a strategic veil. Jargon is shaped by mobility, displacement, illegality, and improvisation. It thrives in places where surveillance is heavy and trust is rare. To speak it is to join a lineage of the unspeakable—not only what cannot be said in public, but what expresses a worldview that must remain subterranean to survive. In the world of jargon, metaphors are never neutral. Language is constantly inverted. The words for friend, enemy, police, or betrayal shift with context and tone. A single phrase may mean its opposite, depending on who says it, how it is said, and to whom. This duplicity is not a flaw, but a feature—a dialectical tool for navigating a hostile world. Slang and jargon do not simply distort the official language; they reveal its pretensions. By twisting it, exaggerating it, mocking it, or refusing it altogether, the speakers of jargon expose how absurd the dominant codes already are. There is a sharp line between this form of underworld speech and the jargon of power. While the former emerges from struggle, necessity, and solidarity, the latter—corporate, bureaucratic, technocratic—serves the opposite function. It hides agency, enforces conformity, and turns communication into simulation. Whereas dangerous-class jargon sharpens difference, official jargon smooths it over. One defends a community; the other destroys meaning under layers of euphemism and abstraction. Though some words are politically problematic they function in the argot not as slurs of sexuality but as metaphors for submission or treachery. The point is not moralistic but strategic. In this language, betrayal is a form of vulnerability to power, and the highest sin is being turned, flipped, or bought. Argot has no patience for collaboration. Becker-Ho insists that this form of language is not just oppositional but poetic. Its metaphors are dense with historical memory. Its humor is dark and anarchic. Its ethics are situational but coherent. It is an oral archive of refusal. It is never fully recorded, never stable, never institutionalised. This is precisely why it remains vital. To write it down is already to risk freezing it. To analyze it is to risk violating it. What emerges is a vision of language as weapon and refuge. To speak in this way is not just to communicate, but to survive, to mock, to trick, and to endure. It is a mode of being that cannot be assimilated. The jargon of the dangerous classes is not a dialect waiting to be codified—it is a world unto itself, forever changing, resisting capture, and speaking in shadows. 'The Essence of Jargon' shows how power,

[242] Becker-Ho, A. (2022) The Essence of Jargon. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

solidarity, and resistance can be hidden inside the folds of everyday words. Language, when pushed to its margins, becomes not less but more human: less rigid, more alive, closer to danger and to truth. It is speech without state, law, or textbook. It is speech that runs, hides, and bites when cornered. It is the murmur of another way of life, overheard just beyond the edge of the dominant order.

Uses and abuses of jargon

In 'Jargon: Its Uses and Abuses[243]' Walter Nash begins his exploration of jargon by distinguishing between the noun 'jargon' and the more active notion of 'jargoning'—language not as a set of terms but as an ongoing process of invention, adoption, and performance. Instead of compiling a fixed dictionary of oddities, Nash maps out the shifting field of specialised and pretentious language across professional, commercial, literary, and bureaucratic domains. He confesses to collecting examples almost obsessively: scribbled during meetings, overheard at dinners, clipped from newspapers. Yet his aim is not only to mock, but to understand the role of jargon in language and life. Jargon may often be a vice, but it is also, paradoxically, a feature of how language grows and adapts. The word jargon refers both to technical language that serves precise communication within a field and to a socially motivated language of obfuscation. This second type, the target of most criticism, is the speech of inflated metaphors, vague abstractions, and pseudo-scientific terms used to signal authority rather than offer clarity. And yet, even this jargon has a function—whether to mark status, deflect scrutiny, or simply play a role in the theatre of professionalism. Professional or 'shop' jargon, though potentially confusing to outsiders, often serves a real need. It evolves within communities of practice to allow for fast, accurate reference. Over time, some of these terms migrate into general speech. Phrases like 'up and running' or 'touch base' began as technical terms but now pepper everyday conversation. Other examples, such as 'taken aback' or 'under way', began in military or nautical usage before becoming idioms. Nash notes that some phrases retain their professional flavor while others, once absorbed into everyday English, lose their specialised edge. But the real problem arises not from technical precision but from performance—the use of jargon not to communicate but to impress. This theatrical side of jargon, or 'show talk', leans heavily on abstraction, coinages, and metaphorical overreach. Nash recounts academic meetings where phrases like 'operating in the tutorial situation' or 'developing entrepreneurial skills' fill the air, projecting activity without meaningful content. In this setting, jargon becomes a substitute for thought—what George Orwell once called 'language designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable'. In education, a course on bricklaying might be titled 'A Graduated Manual Skills Approach for Distance Learners', converting a basic skill into a bureaucratic mouthful. But as Nash shows, this is not limited to universities. Menu writers, advertisers, and journalists all participate in the same inflation of language, dressing beans on toast as 'golden legumes steeped in tangy tomato reduction atop artisanal bread'. The book traces how these patterns operate across domains. Metaphor becomes one of jargon's most potent tools that lend a sense of crisis or expertise but often confuse more than they clarify. The verbal padding creates an illusion of fluency, which serves those who want to sound informed without being pinned down. Jargon, however, is not just an annoyance—it can be a weapon. 'Sales talk', the most manipulative variant, wraps hollow promises in grandiose phrasing. The timeshare industry, for example, does not sell holidays; it sells 'lifestyle investments in perpetual leisure assets'. This kind of language reframes ordinary transactions as mythic commitments. Political discourse borrows the same tactics. Policies are not implemented; they are 'rolled out in dynamic

[243] Nash, W. (1993) "Jargon: Its Uses and Abuses." London: Routledge.

stakeholder environments'. Where sales talk is involved, the imperative becomes: 'let the citizen beware'. The real abuse of jargon is not its strangeness but its evasiveness. The danger is not in using specialised terms but in pretending that opacity equals depth. Some academic traditions, he notes, have gone as far as to celebrate unintelligibility as a kind of political resistance—arguing that clarity is an ideological trap. Jargon, then, is part of how humans perform their roles, signal group belonging, and assert control over meaning. It is simultaneously a creative force and a corrosive one.

Decoding the jargon

In 'Dog Whistles, Walk-Backs, and Washington Handshakes[244]', Chuck McCutcheon and David Mark provide an essential guide to the cryptic world of American political speech—a universe where euphemism, slang, and ritualistic phrasing dominate how power is communicated and contested. Political language has always been an exercise in performance, but in the modern era, it has grown into a dense thicket of coded signals designed more to obscure than to reveal. The authors argue that deciphering this language is not a niche concern for political insiders—it is central to understanding how power operates in public life. From terms like 'walk-backs' to 'document dumps', political communication today is calibrated less for clarity than for strategic ambiguity. This is not accidental. In Washington, language functions as a gatekeeping mechanism. Mastering the lingo allows one entry into insider circles, while misunderstanding it can mark someone as naïve or an outsider. Even newcomers to government often find it takes a year just to learn how to interpret the constant stream of jargon. Worse, this insider vocabulary frequently spills into journalism and public discourse, where it is rarely explained, deepening the divide between political actors and the public. This linguistic fragmentation, though seemingly obscure, point to broader structural habits: the manipulation of legislative language, the performance of transparency, and the theatre of accountability. Political language functions not only to persuade but to signal affiliation and control. Buzzwords and euphemisms serve as verbal armour, insulating politicians from scrutiny while flattering their base. This is particularly evident in the media's coverage of scandals. Every new controversy now comes branded with the '-gate' suffix, from the serious (Bridgegate) to the absurd (Nipplegate). The authors trace this back to the original Watergate scandal, showing how its linguistic legacy has come to dominate public understanding of impropriety and accountability. Beyond labelling scandals, the media and politicians collaborate—sometimes unintentionally—in crafting and maintaining narratives. Soundbites are engineered for repetition: 'Don't double down on trickle down'— stick because they appeal to emotion and are easy to remember. These phrases are not accidental; they are carefully designed tools of influence. Yet political language also exposes its practitioners. Terms like 'blowback' and 'committing candor' highlight moments where the intended script slips. These moments reveal the tension between public relations and unscripted truth. Scandal management, too, has its own lexicon. Politicians 'walk back' comments when they go awry, stage document 'dumps' on Friday evenings to bury bad news and often rely on a loyal spouse to generate public sympathy in moments of crisis. Meanwhile, hot mic incidents—where unguarded remarks go public—offer rare, unscripted insight into the political persona beneath the polish. What makes this language so powerful is its ability to define public perception. A 'zinger' in a debate can shift momentum overnight. A 'gotcha question' can sink a candidacy. And the pressure to always stay 'on message' is so intense that even a minor deviation can be parsed endlessly for hidden meanings. Each word or phrase is embedded in a broader strategy of persuasion, distraction, or

[244] McCutcheon, C. and Mark, D. (2014) Dog Whistles, Walk-Backs, and Washington Handshakes: Decoding the Jargon, Slang, and Bluster of American Political Speech. New York: Random House.

damage control. From the media ecosystem's embrace of 'process stories' and 'tick-tocks', to the weaponisation of memes in debate culture, the authors argue that language has become the main battleground where political narratives are won and lost. Understanding this jargon is no longer optional. In a world where headlines are crafted to provoke, and where public debate is often reduced to slogans, being able to recognise and decode the language of power is a form of resistance. Without this literacy, citizens are left at the mercy of professionals trained to blur meaning while pretending to illuminate it.

Jargon unchained

Len Guff's 'Jargon Unchained[245]' is a sharp, entertaining takedown of corporate language at its worst. What might sound like harmless workplace phrases are, in his view, carefully constructed traps—designed to confuse, impress, and obscure meaning rather than clarify it. The book is both a satirical glossary and a subtle call to linguistic honesty. Rather than merely mocking office clichés, Guff traces their emergence and warns of the broader consequences they have on how people think and communicate in professional environments. The book begins with a confession: it might annoy the reader. And not without reason. Many of the entries—terms like 'best practice', 'cascade', or 'thought shower'—are so common they no longer register as odd. But once exposed to scrutiny, their absurdity is hard to unsee. Guff's argument is that jargon does not evolve to make communication more precise; it grows as camouflage. The more convoluted the language, the less scrutiny a speaker faces. And in a culture where performance often counts more than substance, these phrases help build entire careers around sounding busy while doing very little. One of the most memorable parts of the book is Guff's description of the 'Jargonista'—that smooth-talking office native who flourishes in environments where no one says what they mean. This person is fluent in syntactic gymnastics and deploys words like 'monetise' or 'leverage' as if they carried some arcane power. They do not. But they sound important, and that is enough to command attention in a meeting. What is really happening, Guff argues, is the substitution of clarity with complexity for the sake of status. Throughout the book, Guff annotates entries with dry, self-aware wit. For example, 'Business Agility' is defined as 'the ability to adapt quickly to changing market demands'—a euphemism, he suggests, for having no clear plan but pretending that is a strategy. 'Cascade', which sounds like a waterfall of enlightenment, usually means the top management will send an email and expect it to magically trickle down into behaviour. The term 'core competencies' is another gem—once a legitimate concept in management theory, now reduced to meaningless filler for slide decks. Even more revealing are the linguistic patterns Guff identifies. Turning nouns into verbs ('impact', 'utilise') gives speakers the illusion of action. Piling on modifiers ('value-added solutions') inflates otherwise empty claims. And vague metaphors like 'ducks in a row' provide the illusion of control and order, even when chaos reigns. According to Guff, these are not accidents. They are the hallmarks of a language culture that rewards noise over sense. Yet the book is not nihilistic. It ends with a modest proposal: speak clearly. Or at least think before speaking. Guff knows jargon will not vanish, but he believes that awareness can limit its harm. Like Orwell's famous warning against decayed metaphors, he urges readers to resist the temptation to speak in borrowed phrases just because they sound clever. After all, the point of language is to connect, not to conceal.

[245] Jargon Unchained by Len Guff (Ebook) - Read free for 30 days. (2025). [online] Everand. Available at: https://www.everand.com/book/246516171/Jargon-Unchained [Accessed 19 Jul. 2025].

The jargon divide

In 'Shoot the Puppy[246]', Tony Thorne explores the peculiar and ever-shifting world of workplace jargon, revealing how it functions not only as a communication tool but also as a marker of power, personality, and professional anxiety. The titular phrase, to 'shoot the puppy', exemplifies the type of bold, unsettling imagery often used to disguise decision-making brutality beneath a cloak of cleverness. Thorne shows how jargon has become the accepted dialect of ambition—simultaneously admired and ridiculed. According to Thorne, office jargon exists in a liminal space: it is neither pure slang nor formal speech, but a hybrid born from business urgency, trendiness, and a desire to sound decisive without necessarily being clear. It promises boldness but often cloaks passivity. A manager may say 'we need to empower our verticals with a more agile approach', which could mean anything—or nothing at all. This kind of language has become ubiquitous, yet it continues to divide workplaces along generational, cultural, and psychological lines. A 2005 survey cited by Thorne reveals a generational tension. Mid-career professionals (aged 30–40) are most likely to use and defend jargon, seeing it as a kind of professional shorthand. Younger and older employees, by contrast, express irritation, and suspicion. Many perceive jargon as a bluff—a way to appear knowledgeable while avoiding specifics. Over two-thirds of respondents said they found such language irritating or insincere, and nearly half admitted to using it to impress others, even while privately disliking it. Jargon, Thorne argues, thrives in environments where status is fluid and ideas must appear novel to survive. It functions as both code and camouflage. Terms like 'footprint', 'heads-up', or 'deliverables' have slipped their original contexts, now used interchangeably in marketing, tech, logistics, and HR. Their spread reveals not just linguistic change but a cultural one: work has become performative, and language is part of the performance. Yet not all jargon is empty. As Thorne acknowledges, linguistic creativity is a natural part of English evolution. Terms like 'al desko' or 'smirting' reflect humor and social commentary, turning mundane habits into sly cultural observations. But when jargon turns from playful to prescriptive—when employees are instructed to 'cascade the message' or 'ideate solutions' on command—it begins to suffocate thought rather than inspire it. 'Shoot the Puppy' does not aim to ban jargon but to understand its strange appeal. Jargon reflects ambition, insecurity, and a collective desire to make the routine feel revolutionary. It mirrors a world where clarity is dangerous, and opacity is strategic. Through playful critique and cultural insight, Thorne opens a window into the psychology of modern workplaces—where saying little, in many words, can sometimes say everything.

Unbearable office jargon

In 'Who Touched Base in My Thought Shower? A Treasury of Unbearable Office Jargon[247]', Steven Poole charts the rise and reign of corporate buzzwords that have turned the modern office into a theatre of linguistic absurdity. These phrases—actioning deliverables, ideating solutions, pivoting strategies—fill boardrooms and email chains with a kind of ritualistic nonsense that is both numbing and oddly contagious. Beneath their shiny surfaces, such expressions reveal a deeper truth: jargon is not merely annoying—it is a tool of control, confusion, and coerced enthusiasm. Office jargon thrives because it serves multiple unspoken purposes. It allows individuals to sound important without saying anything substantive, and it masks conflict or incompetence beneath layers of agreeable vagueness. A layoff becomes a restructuring, a failure is a learning opportunity, and burnout is merely a capacity challenge.

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[246] Thorne, T. (2007) Shoot the Puppy: A Survival Guide to the Curious Jargon of Modern Life. London: Penguin.

[247] Poole, S. (2013) Who Touched Base in My Thought Shower? A Treasury of Unbearable Office Jargon. London: Sceptre.

These euphemisms cushion the brutality of corporate life while simultaneously depersonalising it. Words that once had weight—team, value, vision—are hollowed out, recycled endlessly in slide decks and town halls until they signify little more than compliance. Jargon is not a modern invention. But today's version is uniquely expansive. It draws from the lexicons of sports, warfare, psychology, and Silicon Valley hype. Touch base, war room, circle back, move the needle—these terms leap across sectors, shaping a shared yet surreal dialect spoken by managers, HR reps, consultants, and interns alike. It is a language where solutions are sold before problems are understood, and where enthusiasm is mandatory, often enforced by smiley face emojis in email footers or 'culture fit' interviews that prize cheerfulness over competence. Poole's book does not just mock this phenomenon; it anatomises it. Behind the silliness lies something more sinister: jargon's capacity to enforce conformity and suppress dissent. The cheerful emptiness of phrases like leaning in or thinking outside the box discourages critical thought. The more people speak in buzzwords, the less they say. And when language collapses into cliché, thought often follows. This degradation of speech reflects the broader demands of emotional labour in contemporary work. It is no longer enough to meet deadlines or solve problems; employees must also live the brand, exude positivity, and bring their whole selves to work—while carefully avoiding any expression that might disrupt the harmony of the group chat. In this sense, office jargon becomes a behavioural script, a way of talking oneself into submission while appearing empowered. Poole's antidote is ridicule—sharp, knowing ridicule. By naming and shaming these phrases, he reclaims meaning from the mire. To laugh at jargon is not merely therapeutic—it is also an act of resistance. It reminds us that language matters, and that clear, honest words are rare and precious. In a world where corporate-speak threatens to replace actual thinking, satire may be the last form of clarity we have.

Talk normal

In 'Talk Normal: Stop the Business Speak, Jargon and Waffle[248]', Tim Phillips takes aim at the bloated language of modern business and urges a return to straightforward communication. His campaign is not rooted in pedantry or linguistic purism but in the deep frustration of someone who has spent decades translating the convoluted into the comprehensible. Whether facing the slippery euphemisms of political doublespeak or the empty buzzwords of corporate culture, Phillips argues that plain language is not simply better—it is a moral necessity. Phillips begins by recounting his life as a journalist constantly stuck with the middle-tier executives and impossible-to-translate white papers. His central concern is not just the proliferation of jargon, but the culture of avoidance, vagueness, and self-importance that such language enables. He explains how words like solutions, stakeholders, and learnings are often used not to convey information but to obscure responsibility or inflate banalities into grand visions. The result is not only confusion but alienation. People feel lost in meetings, unsure of what has been said—let alone decided. What drives the persistence of jargon, Phillips argues, is insecurity masked as confidence. Complex language can make people sound intelligent or 'in the know', even when they are bluffing. But this kind of linguistic performance does not serve the audience—it serves the speaker's ego. The irony is that real expertise is most often communicated with clarity. It takes much more skill to explain a difficult concept in simple terms than to wrap it in abstraction and acronyms. Throughout the book, Phillips returns to what he calls the principles of 'Talknormalism'—a modest manifesto for honesty in communication. First, be understood by everyone. Second, stop trying to sound clever. Third, focus on clarity of thought, not just grammar rules. These principles are not revolutionary, but

[248] Phillips, T. (2010) Talk Normal: Stop the Business Speak, Jargon and Waffle. London: Kogan Page.

in today's climate of polished vacuity, they feel radical. He illustrates his points with biting humor and personal stories, such as being trapped in long conference calls where no one dares to speak plainly, or watching politicians dodge questions with what he calls 'wombat diversions'—absurd rhetorical detours designed to distract and mislead. In one of the most candid passages, he tells the story of failing to speak up when a celebrity asked his opinion on a questionable career move. It haunts him, not because he could have changed the outcome, but because he missed the opportunity to say something honest when it mattered. This anecdote becomes a metaphor for everyday moments when people bite their tongues rather than call out nonsense—especially in the workplace. Phillips argues that this silence, born from politeness or fear, reinforces the very culture of evasion that jargon thrives in. 'Talk Normal' is not a style guide or a grammar manual. It is a protest. Against pretension, against confusion, against language that talks in circles. It is, at heart, a plea for honesty—for talking like a human being, even in the most corporate of settings.

The buzzword wars

In 'Talk Normal', Tim Phillips explores the murky battlefield where language is hijacked, reshaped, and weaponised to sell not only ideas but illusions. At the heart of this phenomenon lies the buzzword—a tool for dressing up the ordinary, hiding the unpleasant, or promoting the barely comprehensible under the guise of progress. Phillips begins by dissecting how buzzwords are used when a product or concept lacks real innovation. When there is nothing new to offer, language becomes the product. Marketing teams and corporate strategists, instead of improving services or telling the truth, tinker with terminology. A dull idea becomes revolutionary, a routine meeting becomes a strategy session, and failure transforms into a learning opportunity. The point is not to communicate, but to reframe perception. Nowhere is this clearer than in the rise of the word synergy. Once a term with real meaning, it became a rhetorical escape hatch for executives during mergers and acquisitions. 'Synergy' suggests mutual gain, alignment, and efficiency, but in practice it often means job losses, asset stripping, and culture clashes. It is an optimistic veil draped over the brutal logic of corporate consolidation. Phillips notes that its use in the press surged dramatically alongside merger activity—not because it was helpful, but because it sounded better than the truth. Another victim of semantic inflation is empowerment. Once tied to meaningful social change, it has been hollowed out into a marketing buzzword. A gym 'empowers' its members; a burger chain 'empowers' your appetite. It implies that people are being handed control, but really they are being handed responsibility with no guarantees. If the tool does not work, that is your fault—not theirs. Yet buzzword culture does not always win. The spectacular flop of 'awaycation', a term coined by a travel company to counteract the popular 'staycation', revealed something important. Unlike organically coined phrases that reflect real shifts—economic restraint, lifestyle changes—corporate neologisms born in boardrooms often fail because people can smell the inauthenticity. 'Awaycation' was rejected not because the idea of travel was offensive, but because the word itself was laughable. Buzzwords also bleed into government and politics, where euphemism becomes policy. Job cuts become re-careering, and raising taxes is rebranded as revenue enhancement. Such rewording is meant to ease public reaction, to deflect, and to confuse. But language, when distorted too far, begins to crumble. People start to notice, and trust erodes. Phillips advocates for what he calls 'Talknormalism'—the radical idea of using language to say what one means. It is a quiet rebellion against the puffery, the vagueness, and the spin. Rejecting buzzwords does not mean rejecting ambition or innovation. It means demanding honesty over noise. The failure of 'awaycation' was not just a failed marketing attempt; it was a small victory for linguistic integrity. The overuse of jargon and poorly chosen

metaphors is more than an annoyance—it is a barrier to understanding. When businesses rely on vague, feel-good phrases to sell products or ideas, they risk alienating their audience. Worse, they create a culture where clarity takes a backseat to the illusion of innovation. The war on buzzwords starts with a battle for less words. Small acts of resistance—clear emails, honest conversations, unadorned job descriptions—can push back. In a culture that overvalues noise, saying less, more clearly, becomes an act of meaning.

The jargon of authenticity

In 'The Jargon of Authenticity[249]', Theodor W. Adorno offers a penetrating critique of a particular mode of language that rose to prominence in postwar Germany—an emotionally charged, quasi-philosophical vocabulary that claimed to express inner truth, spiritual depth, and existential seriousness. But far from articulating anything genuinely authentic, Adorno argues that this language conceals ideological motives beneath its sanctimonious tone. Words like 'authenticity', or 'concern' have been systematically emptied of meaning, turned into linguistic signals that convey authority without content. Their purpose is no longer to communicate, but to seduce, intimidate, and reassure. They belong to a form of speech that masquerades as depth while avoiding thought. Adorno's attack is not on authenticity itself, but on the way the term has been instrumentalised. The jargon arose in part from religious and existentialist traditions, but in its secular form it abandoned metaphysical weight while retaining a sacred tone. This linguistic style, heavily influenced by thinkers such as Heidegger and Jaspers, adopted a voice of solemnity and revelation. It presented its statements as timeless insights into Being, yet often lacked clarity, argument, or connection to lived experience. The result was a language that cloaked banality in majesty. Adorno sees this as not only intellectually dishonest, but dangerous—because it lends an aura of profundity to whatever content it carries, including authoritarian and anti-democratic ideas. The origins of this jargon, according to Adorno, lie in a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism and academic formalism. In the 1920s and 30s, many intellectuals in Germany sought new ways to express meaning beyond rigid logic or dry analysis. Existentialism, theological revivalism, and the cult of personal experience flourished. These movements cultivated a language of inwardness, one that privileged tone over truth, presence over argument. But once removed from its theological or philosophical roots, this language became untethered—free-floating signs of emotional seriousness that could be attached to any message. By the 1950s, this jargon had spilled into administration, education, therapy, business, and everyday life, where it began to function as a general code for moral legitimacy. Adorno emphasises that the jargon is not just a set of words—it is a way of speaking that appeals to authenticity while evading critique. Its performance of sincerity becomes a substitute for actual content. It simulates depth. The speaker does not need to prove anything or offer evidence; the tone itself suffices. The speaker is assumed to be trustworthy, not because of what is said, but because of how it is said. This is where Adorno sees the true danger. When people mistake performance for truth, language ceases to serve communication and begins to serve power. The jargon of authenticity is a symptom of 'damaged life'—a society in which meaning has been hollowed out, where ideological forms persist without substance. In such a world, people long for meaning, but are offered only its shadow. The jargon fills this void by offering a ready-made style of seriousness, a language that feels profound even when it says nothing. It is seductive because it flatters the speaker and the listener alike. Both are elevated, reassured that they are part of a higher conversation. But they are merely circulating clichés.

[249] Adorno, T.W. (1973). The Jargon of Authenticity. Northwestern University Press.

One of the most insidious aspects of the jargon, Adorno argues, is its capacity to naturalise inequality and authority. By presenting itself as beyond ideology—as a pure, authentic expression of human concern—it conceals the very structures of power it serves. For example, bureaucracies and corporations adopt jargon to humanise their image: they 'empower', 'care', 'share a vision'. In doing so, they deflect scrutiny and critique. The language implies moral purpose, even as the institutions act in self-interest. This is why Adorno insists that the critique of language must be part of the critique of society. The way people speak reveals how they think—and how they are ruled. In a world saturated with slogans and stylised sincerity, Adorno's critique remains relevant. The jargon of authenticity did not disappear with postwar Germany. It morphed and migrated, infiltrating contemporary politics, marketing, academia, and self-help culture. It persists wherever language is used not to clarify but to impress, not to question but to confirm. Such use of language serves the social order by discouraging critique. It turns philosophy into liturgy, thinking into ritual. The dignity it offers is a substitute for justice, the depth it promises a mirage. This is the real violence of the jargon: it invites people to see their alienation as destiny and their silence as truth.

3.3. Slang and smart talk

Slang

(Lexicons of belonging: The cultural force of slang)

'Slang is not just informal speech; it's a barometer of attitude, a signal of belonging, and a rebellion against linguistic stagnation'.

— Michael Adams, Slang: The People's Poetry

Slang

Slang is a language of edges, born in alleyways of speech where formal grammar does not reach. It thrives on the margins of respectability, yet it shapes how people live, laugh, and identify themselves. Slang can be understood not just as playful or improper speech but as a tool—sometimes a weapon—of social inclusion and exclusion. It colours expression, collapses distance, and adds flair to otherwise flat conversation. But more importantly, it serves as a marker of who belongs, who understands, and who does not. Historically, the term 'slang' entered English in the mid-18th century, first describing the secretive language of thieves and vagabonds. It did not begin as a celebration of verbal innovation but as a suspicion—language used by those up to no good. Its etymology can be traced to northern English dialects and Scandinavian roots, associating it with movement, looseness, and even straying, as in Old Norse 'slangi' and 'slangr'. Its journey from describing turf to the speech of those inhabiting that turf is telling. Territory became tongue. Language mapped identity. That identity was almost always group-based. Slang belongs to those who need it. It protects the speech of insiders and repels the outsider. This is as true of teenage slang as it is of prison lingo or military codes. Each slang word carries a history of usage, often submerged, and with it a tacit set of rules about who is allowed to speak it. Unlike dialect or jargon, which might reflect geography or profession, slang is deliberately informal. It often challenges the propriety of standard language, not just for convenience but to disrupt, signal, or seduce. Slang is not merely vulgar speech—it is a conscious substitution, a cipher. It does not arise to clarify but to reframe. One might say 'croak' instead of 'die' not to soften the truth but to add bravado, mockery, or irony. Slang is performance. Its meanings are fluid. Slang captures emotion and fashion in ways standard

vocabulary resists. It spreads through music, film, internet memes, and subcultures—speeding up in the digital age. What once took a decade to catch on now explodes overnight through hashtags or viral videos. But just as quickly, slang fades. Words like 'groovy' or 'rad' become relics, their punch dulled by overuse or commercial adoption. At its best, slang is democratic, open to innovation and wit. At its worst, it calcifies into clichés or exclusionary codes. But its enduring presence shows that people always seek ways to reinvent speech—ways that are faster, funnier, rawer, or more alive than official language allows. Slang lives where speech stretches toward emotion, urgency, and community, offering expression that is as loose and vibrant as the lives that shape it.

The people's poetry

In 'Slang: The People's Poetry[250]', Michael Adams explores the vibrant world of slang as more than a casual deviation from standard language—it is a living, poetic form of expression that gives voice to creativity, resistance, identity, and community. Rather than treating slang as linguistic graffiti on the wall of proper English, Adams positions it as a central element in the architecture of how people communicate who they are and how they belong. Slang is not a fringe phenomenon; it is the pulse of language in motion, shaped by context, invention, and the desire to speak with style and attitude. What makes slang so distinct is not just its vocabulary but its function. Slang is a linguistic performance. It marks in-group belonging and out-group exclusion, often communicating more about one's attitude and allegiances than about the topic at hand. A word like 'mongo', for example, feels strange and vivid—its origin in sanitation-worker slang and its adoption into public use show how such terms travel from private codes to shared vernaculars. The sound alone sets it apart from standard English, and this phonetic playfulness is part of its poetic charm. Slang often feels fresh because it sounds different, borrowing from noise and nonsense to challenge formality. Adams underscores that slang is not necessarily fleeting, as many assume. Some terms vanish quickly, while others survive for generations. The idea that slang is defined by its ephemerality is misleading; instead, its vitality lies in its flexibility. Words like 'smashed' or 'wasted' to describe intoxication have remained in use for decades, while new generations introduce their own twists. Slang may be short-lived in one form but eternal in function—it constantly renews itself in response to cultural rhythms. At its heart, slang is the poetry of the people. It thrives on metaphor, humor, rhythm, and surprise. Whether through internal rhymes, vivid images, or clever blends like 'chillax', slang captures emotional truth in compact, energetic forms. It speaks to lived experience in ways formal language often cannot. It is not merely expressive—it is subversive. To use slang is often to defy conventions, to wink at rules, to tell the world that language can be played with, not just obeyed. But slang is not always joyful. It can be cruel, exclusive, or provocative. Its irreverence can slide into aggression. Yet even this reflects its power—it gives speakers tools to resist, to critique, to laugh, and to wound. It is language unfiltered, language alive. Slang is what people say when they are not being watched, and in that rawness, it reveals something essential about human expression. Adams's study repositions slang as central, not peripheral, to language and meaning. It is the product of shared lives, of cultural collisions and improvisations. From bar slang to campus talk, from playground insults to hip-hop vernacular, slang reveals who people are, who they want to be, and who they refuse to become. Its instability is its strength, allowing it to move through generations, adapt across contexts, and resist easy definition. In the end, slang is democratic. It is not imposed from above but bubbles up from below. It is not standard,

[250] Adams, M. (2009) Slang: The People's Poetry. New York: Oxford University Press.

but it is essential. As Adams argues, it may not always be respectable, but it is always revealing. Slang is, in every sense, the poetry of the people.

Slang and group identity

In 'Slang', Michael Adams presents slang not merely as an informal variant of language but as a powerful marker of group identity and social alignment. Slang operates as a linguistic shibboleth—its correct use signals belonging, while its misuse marks exclusion. It encodes not only what people say, but how they place themselves socially, culturally, and emotionally within or outside a group. The stakes of slang are more than linguistic; they are symbolic acts of claiming or refusing identity. Adams highlights the delicate balance between authenticity and appropriation. To use slang convincingly, one must be immersed in the community that created it. The failure to do so reveals a lack of shared experience. This is most evident in attempts by outsiders to use African American Vernacular English (AAVE). When speakers not socialised in AAVE deploy its slang for effect—whether ironically or aspirationally—the result often rings hollow or offensive. Slang, in this sense, defends its borders. It is not merely vocabulary but a social performance that demands real credentials. The phenomenon of cultural appropriation is central to Adams's analysis. Many slang expressions arise from marginalised or subcultural groups as forms of resistance, wit, or social commentary. Yet when these expressions are adopted by the mainstream—often white, affluent speakers—they lose their critical edge. Words like woke, bling, or bae began in Black communities with nuanced meanings. But once they entered mass media, branding, and advertising, their depth was flattened into trendiness. Slang thus becomes both a weapon and a commodity—shaped in protest and then absorbed, repackaged, and sold. Slang is inherently dynamic, tied to performance and position. This flexibility allows it to carry social critique and humor, yet also makes it vulnerable to dilution. Adams notes that this cycle—resistance, adoption, and neutralisation—repeats across generations. The function of slang as resistance never disappears, but the specific words that perform this role must constantly be renewed. Crucial to this analysis is the concept of code-switching. For African American speakers fluent in both AAVE and Standard English, switching between registers is seamless. It reflects cultural fluency and situational awareness. However, when white speakers try to code-switch into AAVE, the result is often awkward or inauthentic. The difference lies not in linguistic ability but in the depth of cultural experience. Language here is not only about saying the right words—it is about having lived them. Slang is not bound to any group; it reflects the complexity of human belonging in all its dimensions. Slang further reveals cultural perceptions and stereotypes. What counts as 'slang' often depends less on the words themselves than on who is speaking them. The innovations, far from degrading language, heighten attention, semantic flexibility, and humor. These cognitive disruptions are not accidental. They are core to the social work slang performs. The surprise, the laughter, the shared wink behind a clever turn of phrase—these are moments of bonding and recognition. Slang is cognitive play with serious social stakes. It creates community not only by labelling the in-group but by activating shared knowledge, humor, and affect. At its deepest level, Adams suggests, slang operates like poetry. It plays with sound, image, rhythm, and metaphor to express what standard language cannot. It allows speakers to show they belong and that they are attuned to the absurdities of the world they navigate. Ultimately, slang functions as a mirror of society's tensions and desires. It tells us who we are, where we come from, and how we wish to be seen. It polices the boundary between insider and outsider while reminding us of the universal human need to connect, mock, resist, and invent through words. As Adams concludes, slang is more than a linguistic curiosity—it is the people's poetry, a cultural act of speech that reflects the ever-shifting architecture of identity.

The future of slang

The future of slang is inseparable from the digital age, where language is constantly being reshaped by speed, connectivity, and self-expression. As new platforms emerge and cultural identities become more layered, slang will grow increasingly fragmented, personalised, and transient. Yet, despite these shifts, its core function remains deeply human: to build bonds, mark belonging, and stretch the boundaries of meaning. In 'Slang and Sociability[251]', Connie Eble explores this function through a detailed study of American college slang, drawing from over 10,000 examples submitted by students at the University of North Carolina between 1972 and 1993. What emerges is a picture of slang not as linguistic detritus, but as a vital means of negotiating identity, humor, status, and group solidarity. The language Eble documents is casual, often playful, but it is also strategic—a coded way of establishing and reinforcing social ties. College students, like other slang-producing communities, use language to claim space and shape experience. Their terms—whether for sex, alcohol, friendship, or frustration—reflect a culture of immediacy and peer connection. Slang acts as a shorthand for shared context. It is a living language, constantly in flux, deeply responsive to cultural moods and generational attitudes. In this sense, it behaves like fashion: stylish, disposable, and capable of marking both inclusion and exclusion. This communal function has deep roots. Medieval students developed their own subversive vocabulary to resist institutional control, much like their modern descendants. With each wave of social transformation—coeducation, desegregation, mass media—slang adapted, absorbing new influences and reflecting new concerns. Slang thrives at the intersection of creativity and necessity. New expressions will continue to rise from subcultures, social movements, and online communities, often marked by irony, resistance, or coded belonging. Digital media have accelerated the cycle of slang's invention, adoption, commodification, and abandonment. Memes, emojis, hashtags, and reaction gifs now function as part of this extended lexicon. Yet slang's increased visibility also makes it vulnerable to dilution. Once a term reaches mainstream popularity, it risks losing its original edge. As it becomes branded, commercialised, or parodied, its social charge weakens. Still, new terms always emerge to replace the old. The churn is part of slang's nature—it thrives on novelty and reinvention. At the same time, the boundary between slang and 'standard' English is blurring. Slang once confined to subcultures or marginalised groups is now embedded in mass media, advertising, and even politics. Expressions born in queer, Black, or youth communities now shape global vernaculars, a phenomenon both empowering and problematic. The mainstreaming of slang raises questions about authenticity, ownership, and cultural erasure. Yet it also demonstrates how central slang has become to modern speech. Interestingly slang rarely draws from academic or classroom language. Instead, it emerges from the emotional terrain of student life: relationships, self-image, pressure, boredom, joy. Slang avoids formal vocabulary not because it is anti-intellectual, but because it operates on a different register. It speaks to feeling, not function; presence, not performance. This makes it an essential window into how people live language, not just learn it. The future of slang, then, is both more democratic and more divided. Everyone has a platform, but not everyone speaks the same language. Slang will continue to segment by age, region, identity, and medium. What unites it is its role as a tool for social play and emotional economy. It is fast, messy, and volatile—but also rich, revealing, and resilient. Slang is never just about words. It is about people—how they signal intimacy, challenge norms, navigate systems, and define themselves in a crowd. As the digital and social

[251] Eble, C. (1996) Slang and Sociability: In-Group Language Among College Students. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

landscapes evolve, so will slang. But its fundamental role will remain: to give shape to the collective texture of lived experience.

Smart talk

(Speaking well, doing better: Language and impact in the age of performance)

'In public speaking, style without substance is performance; substance without style is missed opportunity'.

— Jay Heinrichs, Thank You for Arguing

Public speaking

Smart talk is a distinct form of language within the tradition of public speaking, characterised by polished delivery, rhetorical skill, and an emphasis on authority and persuasion in front of an audience. Public speaking is more than just standing in front of a crowd—it is a deliberate act of reaching out, of creating meaning through words, tone, and presence. From ancient city-states to digital platforms, the practice has adapted while retaining its core: the human urge to connect, persuade, and express. Regardless of setting, public speaking remains a potent tool for shifting perspectives, sharing ideas, and building collective understanding. Its roots trace back to classical traditions where thinkers like Aristotle and Cicero defined speech categories that still resonate today: political argument, legal defence, and ceremonial address. But the purpose of public speaking has always extended beyond these structures. At its heart, it is about shaping how others see the world—through logic, emotion, and story. At its core, speaking in public demands clarity and intention. A speaker must recognise the audience—not as a mass, but as individuals with their own assumptions, doubts, and curiosities. Tailoring a message means knowing when to inform, when to provoke, and when simply to listen. Whether calming fears or calling for action, the best public speakers adapt their approach to meet the mood of the room. Persuasion, prompting, and nudge are some of the most familiar goals. It asks the speaker to move others—not through brute logic alone, but through shared experience and emotional resonance. This might mean using repetition to stress a point, drawing on irony to disarm resistance, or offering metaphors that shift how something is felt rather than just understood. Even a single powerful story can move hearts more deeply than charts or statistics. Some of the most compelling public speakers, like those on TED stages, use their own lives as a bridge to wider truths, turning personal pain or insight into collective reflection. This type of smart talk is a linguistic intervention: a kind of speaking that does not just reflect reality but changes it. Here, communication becomes active engagement—challenging the dominant meanings of things and proposing new interpretations. The speaker does not merely inform or persuade but reshapes how people see the world. This kind of speech is not about one voice alone; it recognises the power of multiple voices in ongoing conversation, each one adjusting the meaning of what came before. Public speaking, then, is not a skill locked in podiums and microphones. It is a dynamic force—intimate and public, formal, and spontaneous. It lives in classrooms, courtrooms, rallies, and even casual conversations that unexpectedly shift someone’s view. In a time flooded with noise, public speaking, at its best, cuts through: not by shouting louder, but by speaking with purpose. The tools may change—slideshows, live streams, AI assistants—but the need for thoughtful speech endures. When done well, public speaking does not just communicate. It uplifts, clarifies, and transforms. It is a dangerous weapon.

The smart-talk trap

In their article 'The Smart-Talk Trap[252]', Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton explore a common but often overlooked dysfunction in organisations: the tendency to replace meaningful action with articulate discussion. Many companies appear active—filled with strategy meetings, planning sessions, and well-crafted mission statements—but fail to implement real change. This gap between knowing and doing is not the result of ignorance but of a cultural bias that favours talk over execution. Ideas and solutions abound, yet tangible results are rare. The authors describe several real-world cases, such as a major metals company and a large furniture firm, where extensive internal discussions failed to produce action for months or even years. Despite having the right information and a clear understanding of their problems, these organisations stalled. The reason? An implicit belief that thinking and talking about change is equivalent to making it happen. One of the central culprits is what Pfeffer and Sutton call 'smart talk'—a mode of communication that emphasises sounding intelligent over getting things done. In such environments, employees focus on being eloquent, critical, and strategic in conversation, often without taking responsibility for implementation. Complex terminology, theoretical frameworks, and clever critiques dominate, but nothing moves forward. Smart talk becomes a substitute for real work. This dynamic is reinforced by business schools and corporate cultures that reward verbal agility. The loudest, most articulate voices in meetings are often assumed to be the most capable, regardless of whether their ideas lead to action. People are taught to dissect plans, question assumptions, and suggest refinements—but rarely to implement them. This creates a cycle in which execution is endlessly delayed under the guise of intellectual preparation. Mission statements offer a telling example. Many organisations spend months crafting elegant declarations of values and purpose, but these often remain divorced from everyday practice. Without accountability or mechanisms for follow-through, they become little more than rhetorical window dressing. In effect, the performance of being smart outweighs the need to be effective. Yet Pfeffer and Sutton argue that the knowing-doing gap can be bridged. Organisations that succeed in turning knowledge into action share several key traits. First, their leaders are directly engaged in the core work. Rather than remaining aloof in managerial abstraction, they understand the operational realities of their teams. Second, they communicate with clarity and simplicity. Overcomplication is seen as a barrier to execution. Such organisations also place emphasis on 'how' questions instead of 'why not' objections. Criticism is constructive, aimed at problem-solving rather than fault-finding. Practical mechanisms are put in place to ensure decisions lead to outcomes—like follow-ups, deadlines, and real consequences for inaction. Above all, they learn by doing, embracing failure as a necessary step toward innovation. Trial, error, and rapid prototyping can be more effective than endless theorising. In the end, Pfeffer and Sutton argue that success lies not in sounding brilliant but in building habits of action. Effective organisations do not just talk about ideas—they make them happen. As they put it, 'You can’t take words to the bank'. In a world filled with voices eager to speak, it is those who act who leave the lasting impact.

Speaking for profit

Public speaking has become more than an art—it is a thriving business. In 'Speaking for Profit[253]', Herman Holz offers a detailed and practical look at the professional speaking

[252] Pfeffer, J. and Sutton, R.I. (1999). The Smart-Talk Trap. [online] Harvard Business Review. Available at: https://hbr.org/1999/05/the-smart-talk-trap.

[253] Holtz, H. (1987). Speaking For Profit. Wiley.

industry, not as a form of performance, but as a commercial venture with real earning potential. The image of a charismatic figure captivating an audience is just one side of the story; the other, less glamorous but more consequential side involves contracts, fees, agencies, and strategies for breaking into the market. Holz's approach focuses not on becoming a master orator but on understanding how speaking engagements can turn into serious income. At the top tier of the industry, the rewards are substantial. When Prime Minister Menachem Begin was offered $15,000 per night by Harry Walker's agency, he quipped, 'I could leave a rich widow'. The joke underscores a truth—speaking can be remarkably lucrative, especially for those with public recognition. Agencies like Walker's represent high-profile individuals, including former presidents and media figures, who earn tens of thousands for a single talk. Yet, as Holz explains, the appeal of the industry is not limited to celebrities. Most of the market is composed of consultants, professionals, and authors earning per appearance. For these individuals, speaking is either a full-time profession or a powerful complement to their primary careers. A consultant may speak at conferences to expand their network, an author might present at seminars to drive book sales, or an executive may address industry gatherings to enhance corporate visibility. Even for professionals with no previous fame, building a speaking career is achievable with preparation, persistence, and a message that audiences find valuable. While the glamour of applause and prestige may appeal, the reality of the job includes long hours, frequent travel, and logistical headaches. Speakers must endure flight delays, poor food, and the solitude of constant hotel stays. Yet for many, these inconveniences are outweighed by the financial and professional rewards. Speakers often supplement their earnings through 'back-of-the-room' sales—offering books, recordings, or coaching services to their audience. Getting booked is another essential skill. Some rely on lecture bureaus to connect with clients; others build their own networks through self-promotion. A hybrid approach is common, mixing agency support with direct outreach. Regardless of the method, visibility and reputation are key. Successful speakers are often those who position themselves strategically in their fields, aligning their speaking topics with current demand and tailoring their messages to the interests of specific audiences. Seminars, once confined to academic or civic spaces, have now become structured and profitable enterprises. Fees for attendees are generating serious income for organisers and speakers alike. Holz's central point is that public speaking is a business—one with its own market, risks, and rewards. For those willing to treat it seriously, the path is open. With a focused message, an understanding of industry logistics, and a commitment to quality, speaking can be more than a platform—it can be a profession. Holz identifies three core requirements for success in professional speaking: having something worth saying, understanding the business mechanics of the field, and maintaining the right attitude—discipline, enthusiasm, and integrity. Contrary to the myth that speakers are born, not made, Holz insists that many successful speakers begin with no special talent, only the willingness to learn and adapt. Technical skills, voice training, or showmanship are less important than clarity, relevance, and professionalism. The demand for speakers remains high. Colleges, trade shows, corporate seminars, cruises, and industry conferences all seek speakers who can inform, entertain, or motivate. Subjects range from motivational topics and humor to specialised knowledge in marketing, technology, or leadership. According to Holz, professional topics dominate the field, as businesses look for speakers who can deliver actionable insights.

Fourth Chapter: THINKING-44498

1. COGNITION

1.1. Thinking

(Thinking beyond words: Cognition, language, and the world)

'Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them'.

—Lev Vygotsky, Thought and Language

'We do not think thoughts—we are thought by them'.

— Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition

Language and thought

The relationship between language and thought has long intrigued philosophers, linguists, and psychologists. At its core lies the question of whether language simply expresses thought or actively shapes it. Two prominent theories mark the poles of this debate. The first is the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, which argues that the structure of a language influences how its speakers perceive and conceptualise the world. While the strong version—linguistic determinism—claims that without language, thought cannot exist, this has largely been rejected. The weaker version—linguistic relativity—suggests instead that language subtly shapes habitual thought, colouring perception, memory, and classification. In contrast, the language of thought hypothesis (LOTH) posits that thinking occurs in a kind of mental code—often called 'mentalese'—that is independent of any spoken language. According to this view, public language merely translates inner representations already formulated in this mental language. Thought, therefore, does not depend on linguistic input to exist, though the act of speaking or writing may refine or extend cognition by making it public, ordered, or re-examinable. Language plays several crucial roles in shaping how people think. It allows internal monologue, guides memory through verbal scaffolding, and facilitates the abstraction of complex ideas. Writing adds another layer of reflection, enabling one to revisit, clarify, and critique their own thoughts. In philosophical terms, language becomes both a tool and a limit—a frame that expands thinking but also bounds it. Empirical research lends some support to linguistic relativity. Cross-cultural studies show that speakers of different languages exhibit different cognitive styles, particularly in spatial orientation, colour discrimination, and number processing. In one famous case, Australian Aboriginal speakers who use cardinal directions (north, south, etc.) instead of relative ones (left, right) have been found to possess extraordinary navigational skills. In another, speakers of languages with limited number words, such as the Pirahã, show difficulty with exact quantities beyond two or three—suggesting that without words for numbers, certain kinds of numerical thought remain out of reach. Other influential theories further complicate the picture. Chomsky's view separates language from general cognition, arguing that language is governed by innate structures unrelated to other mental systems. Piaget viewed language as one among many cognitive tools acquired through stages of development, while Vygotsky emphasised the merger of thought and language in early childhood, seeing speech as transforming internal experience. More recently, cognitive therapy and behavioural economics have explored how the framing of language influences decision-

making, mood, and motivation. A positive or negative formulation of the same choice can lead to entirely different outcomes. Finally, perspectives such as general semantics, E-Prime, and non-sexist language initiatives demonstrate the ethical and cultural implications of linguistic framing. These approaches highlight how habitual patterns of speech can entrench biases, limit awareness, or restrict the range of viable thought. Even bilingual individuals may shift values depending on the language they are using, suggesting that language activates not just vocabulary, but entire worldviews. Taken together, these theories and studies reveal that language is not merely a vessel for conveying thought—it is an active participant in shaping how humans understand, imagine, remember, and decide.

Linguistic Relativity

Linguistic relativity is the idea that the structure and vocabulary of a language can subtly shape how its speakers perceive, think about, and experience the world. This notion, often associated with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, does not claim that language locks people into a fixed worldview, but rather that it nudges thought directions. It suggests that speakers of different languages may see, remember, or reason differently—not because of biology, but because of the habits of their language. The stronger claim, linguistic determinism, argues that language limits and determines thought. This has largely been set aside. Few believe that people are cognitively trapped by their grammar or vocabulary. Instead, a weaker form—linguistic relativity—has gained credibility. This version proposes that language influences attention, memory, and conceptual habits in subtle but measurable ways. It does not restrict what one can think, but it can influence how one tends to think. Historically, this view was shaped by anthropologist Franz Boas, who emphasised the cultural richness of languages previously considered 'primitive'. His student, Edward Sapir, built on this by noting that language and culture are deeply intertwined. Benjamin Lee Whorf then advanced these ideas, particularly through his study of Native American languages like Hopi. Whorf argued that because Hopi lacks certain grammatical tenses, its speakers may experience time differently than English speakers. His work was provocative, but often anecdotal, and later criticised for exaggerating differences or misrepresenting linguistic facts. Despite this early backlash, interest in linguistic relativity returned in the late 20th century with more rigorous research. Cross-linguistic studies began to find real, if limited, effects of language on cognition. Speakers of languages with different spatial systems—like those who use cardinal directions instead of 'left' and 'right'—often perform better on orientation tasks. People who speak languages with many colour terms can distinguish and remember shades more easily. Other studies have explored how grammatical gender, verb tense, or word order may affect memory, emotional framing, or moral judgment. The idea gained broader public attention through fictional explorations, most notably the 2016 film 'Arrival', where an alien language alters a human’s perception of time. This dramatic scenario is a fictional version of linguistic determinism, but the underlying theme—that language reshapes experience—reflects the enduring appeal of the relativity hypothesis. More nuanced theories, like Dan Slobin’s 'thinking for speaking', suggest that while language may not affect all thought, it does shape the way people organise information when preparing to speak. In this view, the act of using language calls certain features of reality into focus and trains speakers to attend to kinds of detail. Linguistic relativity continues to inspire research across psychology, linguistics, and anthropology. Its appeal lies in the recognition that language is not a neutral tool but an active part of cognition. People think with language, through language, and sometimes, because of language. While it may not define the boundaries of the possible, it helps chart the pathways of the familiar.

'Thinking for speaking'

In contexts of long-term bilingualism, where two languages coexist in sustained contact, Dan I. Slobin introduces the concept of 'thinking for speaking[254]' as a crucial cognitive mechanism guiding linguistic adaptation. This process refers to the mental framing of experience in ways that align with the expressive resources of a particular language. Slobin's research on spatial and motion expressions led to his theory of 'thinking for speaking', which argues that language shapes habitual thought patterns. This view, a moderate form of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, contrasts with Chomsky's notion of an innate language faculty, emphasising instead that language learning involves acquiring language-specific cognitive habits. For bilingual speakers, the need to articulate ideas across two linguistic systems often leads to the restructuring of how experiences are conceptualised and verbalised. Rather than mere lexical or structural borrowing, the shift occurs at the level of mental representation, where speakers must continually adapt their thinking to accommodate the grammatical and conceptual frameworks of both languages. Slobin demonstrates how 'thinking for speaking' can influence grammatical innovation, especially in areas where one language possesses morphosyntactic features that the other lacks. A central example is evidentiality—the grammatical marking of information source—which is obligatory in Turkish and many Andean languages but not in English or Spanish. In the Ottoman Balkans, several local languages developed evidential markers under the influence of Turkish, while in the Andes, Spanish adopted evidential forms under the influence of Quechua and Aymara. In both cases, the borrowing was not of surface forms but of conceptual routines: the cognitive demand to indicate how one knows something became internalised by speakers, shaping expression in the other language. This subtle transformation occurs because the cognitive system of a bilingual speaker becomes attuned to expressing categories that are salient in either language. The conceptualiser, a cognitive component in speech production, is forced to accommodate both linguistic codes and their demands. In the case of Turkish, speakers must always be aware of whether they witnessed an event directly or learnt about it indirectly. This awareness becomes habitual, influencing not only Turkish but also how bilingual speakers express themselves in languages like English, leading to an increased use of hedging phrases such as 'apparently' or 'it seems'. Slobin's framework reframes contact-induced change as a function not of random transfer but of systematic cognitive adaptation. The concept of 'thinking for speaking' shows how language contact is mediated by communicative needs and mental habits, not just structural compatibility. Evidentiality becomes a compelling case where the need to express a cognitively salient distinction pushes speakers to create new grammatical functions in their second language—using native linguistic material to fulfill foreign conceptual obligations. Thus, 'thinking for speaking' reveals the deep connection between cognition, communication, and grammar. It demonstrates how language contact leads to convergence not simply through borrowing, but through the speaker's persistent need to express familiar categories in new forms. In doing so, it expands our understanding of linguistic change by placing speaker experience, bilingual cognition, and communicative intention at the centre of explanation.

[254] Slobin, D.I., 2017. Thinking for speaking and the construction of evidentiality in language contact. In: A. Aikhenvald and R.M.W. Dixon, eds. The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Typology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–25.

Life scripts and life stories

According to Dorthe Berntsen and Annette Bohn in 'Cultural Life Scripts and Individual Life Stories[255]' when people tell their life stories, they rarely narrate a chronological list of every remembered moment. Instead, they highlight episodes—those that seem defining, significant, or symbolic. Milestones like falling in love, graduating, or becoming a parent are more likely to be mentioned than ordinary or unpleasant events. But the process of choosing what matters in a life story is not purely personal. It is shaped by culturally shared expectations known as 'life scripts', which function as mental templates for what a 'normal' life should look like. Life scripts are not invented anew by each individual. They are learnt and internalised through stories, media, social interactions, and institutions. In every culture, certain events are seen as standard or normative: finishing school, finding a partner, securing a job, having children. These events are not just statistically common—they carry symbolic weight and moral value. They structure the way individuals think about life stages and give shape to how people recall and recount their personal past. Although contemporary societies emphasise individual autonomy, life scripts remain remarkably powerful. Even in cultures that promote freedom and self-expression, deviations from the expected timeline—early marriage, late parenthood, or choosing not to marry at all—can attract judgment. Scripts also assign meaning to timing: getting a first job at 16 may be seen as admirable in one context and premature in another. The concept of 'on-time' and 'off-time' events shows how much memory is entangled with cultural norms. These scripts do not merely influence how people plan their lives—they also shape how they remember them. Research has shown that individuals disproportionately recall events from adolescence and early adulthood, a phenomenon known as the *reminiscence bump*. This memory peak coincides with the period when most culturally scripted milestones occur. It is not just that these years are emotionally intense; it is that they are pre-encoded as meaningful by the culture itself. As individuals mature, their personal narratives tend to align more closely with cultural life scripts. Children's early autobiographical accounts often feature fantastical or highly personal elements—meeting a dinosaur, becoming a princess, or winning an imaginary race. Over time, and with social learning, their life stories shift toward culturally recognised events. The process of internalising these scripts appears to enhance narrative coherence: individuals who use culturally structured milestones tend to produce more logically ordered and socially intelligible life stories. However, life scripts are not fixed across cultures or eras. For instance, obtaining a driver's license is a critical life marker in many American stories, while it may be irrelevant elsewhere. In traditional societies, puberty rites or inheritance milestones may carry more weight than formal education or romantic relationships. Scripts also evolve with social change—what was once taboo or marginal can become central over time, as with single parenthood or same-sex marriage. What makes life scripts so enduring is their dual function: they offer both guidance and meaning. They help people imagine possible futures and evaluate past decisions. At the same time, they provide a sense of belonging. Narrating a life that follows a shared script reinforces the feeling of being part of a community or generation. But diverging from the script can also be meaningful. People often frame unexpected events—such as illness, migration, or rebellion—not as failures, but as turning points that shaped who they are. In this sense, personal identity is not forged in isolation. It emerges at the intersection of individual memory and collective storytelling. Life stories gain coherence through the scaffolding of life scripts, yet remain open to reinterpretation. A life story can be retold in countless ways, each shaped by new experiences, shifting values, and the influence of others' narratives. Life scripts give structure to memory, but they do not determine it. They offer a map, not a mandate. Within

[255] Berntsen, D. & Bohn, A. (2010) Cultural Life Scripts and Individual Life Stories. Cambridge University Press.

that map, individuals navigate their unique paths, sometimes following well-trodden routes, sometimes forging new directions. What matters is not only what is remembered, but how those memories are assembled into a meaningful whole—one that connects the personal with the cultural, the remembered with the imagined.

Planning of speech production

Inner speech plays a crucial role in the mental organisation of language, especially during the transition from thought to spoken expression. A.A. Leontiev[256], one of the leading figures in Soviet psycholinguistics, developed a model that locates inner speech at the heart of the planning process in speech production. Rather than being a byproduct of verbal expression, inner speech actively prepares the speaker's thoughts for articulation, acting as a bridge between internal cognition and external communication. Leontiev's framework breaks speech production into two broad stages: planning and execution. The planning stage itself is subdivided into motive, intention, and inner programming. A motive arises from a communicative need or a situation requiring verbal response. This is followed by a speech intention—an emerging idea of what should be expressed. Only then does the speaker engage in inner programming, where the idea is mentally rehearsed, ordered, and structured. Here, inner speech takes shape in a way distinct from external speech: abbreviated, personal, and tailored to meaning rather than grammar. It encodes subjective meanings that are often too fluid or implicit to be fully articulated in words. In the execution phase, these internal meanings are translated into grammatical and lexical structures fit for external use. Leontiev describes this as a post-programming process where the inner, sense-based formulations are converted into concrete linguistic forms and finally articulated through motor commands. Thus, inner speech serves not just as a private rehearsal, but as an essential organiser of thought, managing both content and intention before language emerges in social space. Leontiev's insight becomes even more illuminating when applied to second language (L2) contexts. Learners of an L2, especially in early stages, rarely formulate thoughts directly in the target language. Instead, they pass through a 'translation stage' in which ideas are first structured using the native language (L1), then consciously translated into L2 forms. This translation process lengthens the planning stage, requiring an additional layer of cognitive mediation. With increased proficiency, some learners report bypassing this stage and generating inner speech directly in the second language—a sign of deeper internalisation. Leontiev also notes that elements of the second language can appear unpredictably in the inner speech of learners. These fragments are not yet stable or systematic but reflect the beginning of L2 integration into the mind's architecture. Over time, with practice and immersion, this randomness gives way to more stable inner L2 structures. What began as translation becomes internal composition. Understanding inner speech through Leontiev's lens helps clarify how humans prepare language in silence before speaking. It reveals the mind's subtle and layered choreography—from impulse to utterance—and helps explain why thinking in a second language is not simply a matter of translation, but a gradual reconfiguration of the mechanisms of thought itself.

Cognitive linguistics

George Lakoff's 'Ten Lectures on Cognitive Linguistics[257]' dismantles the traditional notion that language is a disembodied system of symbols pointing toward a neutral world of facts. Instead, he proposes that meaning emerges from the embodied mind—from neural patterns shaped by our bodies, actions, perceptions, and social environments. In this view,

[256] Guerrero, M.C.M. de (2005) Thinking Words in a Second Language, Westport, CT: Praeger.
[257] Lakoff, G. (2019) Ten Lectures on Cognitive Linguistics. Leiden: Brill.

language is not a mirror of reality but a mechanism for constructing it. The mind does not simply label the world; it interprets, filters, and reshapes it through metaphor, categorisation, and frame structures. At the centre of cognitive linguistics is the rejection of the classical view of categories as fixed sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. Traditional semantics would treat something like 'bird' as a stable list of features shared by all members. But experiments by Eleanor Rosch showed that some members—like robins—are more prototypical than others, like ostriches or penguins. Humans think in terms of these prototypes, not abstract definitions. Categories are graded, and typicality affects how quickly one recognises or reasons about examples. This challenges the assumption of binary inclusion and reveals that real cognition operates along a spectrum. A lemon is not just any used car; it is a nightmare prototype. A prince may be a prototypical 'hero', but a bureaucrat likely is not. Lakoff shows how such distinctions influence not only recognition but also moral and political reasoning. Conceptual metaphors further reveal that abstract domains are understood through concrete experiences. Time, for instance, is treated like space: people look 'forward' to the future and 'leave the past behind'. Love becomes a journey ('We're at a crossroads'), anger becomes heat ('He's boiling with rage'), and ideas become objects to be grasped or dropped. These metaphors are not decorative but constitutive of meaning. They shape how one frames problems, chooses policies, or feels about events. Moreover, cognitive linguistics emphasises embodiment. Human experiences—standing upright, seeing forward, manipulating tools—structure the metaphorical mapping of concepts. The vertical axis encodes power ('high status'), quantity ('prices went up'), or control ('she's above reproach'). Even math is rooted in the body's interaction with the world: more is up because adding water to a glass makes the level rise. These metaphorical mappings correspond to neural circuits, not philosophical abstractions. Language is also structured by frames—networks of background knowledge that shape understanding. A word like 'sell' presupposes a buyer, goods, money, and an exchange. Without invoking the entire frame, meaning collapses. Political language exploits these structures: 'tax relief' assumes taxation is a burden; 'welfare' evokes a recipient frame that can be either nurturing or parasitic, depending on metaphorical context. Lakoff's theory explains why persuasion is not just about facts but about framing. Competing frames make certain facts visible. A protest can be a riot or a revolution depending on which frame is activated. People do not change their minds by receiving more data, but by shifting the metaphors and categories through which they interpret the data. Cognitive linguistics thus returns language to its human roots. Meaning is not floating in a Platonic realm of truths, nor is it stored in dictionaries. It is enacted, constructed, and embodied. The grammar of a language is not a logical scaffold but a choreography of thought, feeling, and perception. Understanding language means understanding the mind—and vice versa. Lakoff's work shifts the task of linguistics from cataloguing external reference to understanding internal structure. It redefines semantics as an embodied, dynamic, and interpretive activity. Meaning is never neutral because cognition never is. Thought itself is metaphorical, and metaphor begins in the body.

The structure of grammar

In his Lectures on Cognitive Linguistics, George Lakoff challenges the traditional view of grammar as a system governed primarily by abstract rules of syntax. Instead, he emphasises constructions—conventional pairings of form and meaning—as the fundamental building blocks of grammar. One key example is the deictic locative construction, as seen in a sentence like 'There's John'. Though syntactically simple on the surface, this utterance expresses a highly contextual and embodied act of pointing. Its meaning depends not only on the grammatical components but also on shared attention and physical presence. This explains why it resists negation ('There isn't John') or embedding ('I believe there's John'), which would undermine

its function as an immediate, performative act. Children acquire such constructions early because they map directly onto perceptual experiences. Saying 'There's John' while seeing John in the room is a seamless integration of vision, reference, and speech. According to Lakoff, constructions like this show that grammar is deeply grounded in bodily interaction with the world, not detached logical structures. Lakoff also distinguishes the deictic locative from the existential construction, as in 'There is a fly on the wall'. While both begin with 'there', the existential construction makes an ontological claim—it asserts that something exists somewhere. It is not tied to shared attention or immediate context, and it allows negation, questioning, and embedding. Its 'there' lacks stress and is semantically empty, functioning mainly to fulfill syntactic positioning. These subtle contrasts illustrate that constructions are not simply templates filled with interchangeable parts, but holistic units with specific functions and meanings. Cognitive linguistics holds that variations of a construction, like those of 'there', arise from minimal adjustments to basic patterns. Some extensions are metaphorical. In the 'delivery deictic' ('Here's your soup'), the act of presenting food is framed as delivering presence. In the 'awe variant' ('There was a king!'), emotional salience shapes the structure, emphasising an imaginative or retrospective presence. In the 'activity-started deictic' ('There he goes again'), repetition and expectation are layered onto the pointing gesture. Each variant retains the core notion of spatial orientation but adapts it to new contexts, linking grammar with the dynamics of thought. This view upends the Chomskyan model of grammar as an autonomous, generative system. Instead, grammar is seen as a network of learnt constructions, stored in memory, and activated through use. These constructions are not only linguistic but cognitive: they involve attention, gesture, perception, and affect. The brain manages grammar through neural circuits that coordinate sensory input with symbolic output. Lakoff stresses that syntactic form is always bound to semantic structure, and the two co-evolve within the constraints of bodily experience. In this light, grammar becomes a living system of embodied concepts, not a formal calculus. Categories like subject and object, tense and aspect, or agent and patient, are not innate abstractions but recurrent patterns in how people experience the world and describe it. Syntax itself is shaped by what can be seen, felt, or imagined—and how it can be shared with others.

Acquisition of language

The evolution of verbal thinking did not occur through a sudden leap but through a gradual transition from instinctive, image-based cognition to structured language. In 'On the Origin of Verbal Thinking: Factors That Might Have Contributed to the Acquisition of Language by Man[258]' R. F. Berg argues that this transition reflects a deep psychological shift, not just a physiological or social one. Verbal thought, unlike its preverbal predecessor, enables abstraction, consistency, and shared understanding—but it emerges from a complex interplay of emotional expression, symbolic interpretation, and social behaviour. One of Berg's central insights is that much of what appears irrational in language—such as contradictory statements or emotional declarations—reveals essential cognitive functions. Language is not solely a tool for rational description; it is an expression of interior states, a vehicle for volition, and often, an approximation of experience. This multiplicity aligns with Karl Bühler's model of language's functions: expressive, directive, and descriptive. Most utterances blend these roles, illustrating that language, even in its logical form, carries residues of preverbal thought. Preverbal thinking, in this account, is rich in sensory images and emotional associations. It persists in dreams and fantasy, unconstrained by logical sequence or spatial-temporal limits. Before words, early

[258] Berg, R. (1966) On the Origin of Verbal Thinking: Factors That Might Have Contributed to the Acquisition of Language by Man. Linguistics, Vol. 4(Issue 28), pp.5-45. https://doi.org/10.1515/ling.1966.4.28.5

humans thought in scenes, rhythms, and emotions. This kind of cognition is not inferior but operates under a different logic—one of resonance rather than reason. What language introduces is a capacity to label, isolate, and abstract those experiences, thereby transforming fluid impressions into stable categories. The origin of this transformation lies in early communal activities, especially those tied to ritual and collective rhythm. Berg emphasises how dance, chant, and synchronised movement may have linked physical expression with sound patterns, reinforcing memory and association. Over time, some vocalisations, once purely emotional or instinctual, acquired symbolic weight through repetition and communal reinforcement. This symbolic leap did not require conscious invention. On the contrary, language likely emerged through misinterpretations and accidents—instances where a sound was mistaken for a sign. Such moments, repeated across generations, allowed for a shared symbolic system to develop. Importantly, this system demanded delayed reaction, the ability to retain energy rather than acting on impulse—opening a space for reflection and abstraction. Verbal language developed through processes of simplification, differentiation, and socialisation. Instead of growing more complex, language became more efficient. Isolated sounds became standardised; patterns were broken down and recombined. The refinement of these units into usable linguistic systems was driven by social needs: to coordinate, to remember, to instruct, and to bind groups together. Yet with this power came cost. Language, Berg suggests, organises reality at the expense of immediacy. It allows humans to think in categories, but also distances them from raw perception. Words can name hunger but fail to convey its texture. They build worlds of thought, but those worlds may contradict lived feeling. In this tension lies the essence of verbal thinking: it makes thought possible, but not always true to experience.

Verbal thinking

From the moment an infant cries out into the world, language becomes the medium through which human life unfolds. That initial cry—marked by rhythm, tone, and urgency—is more than instinct; it is the first indication that language shapes how humans perceive and interact with their surroundings. According to Marilyn Buckley in 'The Development of Verbal Thinking and Its Implications for Teaching[259]', verbal thinking begins not in the classroom, but in the earliest sounds of infancy, long before formal education. Language acquisition in the first year is not passive. Children do not simply copy sounds—they decode the structure of speech, detect patterns, and attach meaning to unfamiliar noise. Regardless of which language surrounds them, they internalise its rhythms and cadences, guided by an innate cognitive sensitivity. This early capacity for linguistic pattern recognition, as Buckley suggests, points to an unconscious intelligence: a drive to construct meaning and revise understanding through constant interaction with language. In these early years, infants explore language through play. Babbling is not random noise—it is experimentation. Infants test phonemes, mimic intonations, and create combinations that hint at the words they will soon form. This linguistic play, described by researchers like Ruth Weir, reveals that language learning is a self-guided process, rooted in pleasure and curiosity. It is an act of invention rather than instruction. As children grow, their speech becomes both a social tool and a cognitive one. What Piaget saw as 'egocentric speech'—language spoken aloud seemingly without an audience—Vygotsky interpreted as the externalisation of thought. Children think by talking; their monologues are internal dialogues made public. Over time, this verbal scaffolding is internalised, becoming the silent structure of conscious thought. The implications for teaching are significant. If children learn and think through speech, then classrooms should foster—not stifle—verbal expression.

[259] Buckley, M. (n.d.) The Development of Verbal Thinking and Its Implications for Teaching. University of California, Berkeley.

Buckley argues that traditional classroom silence does not encourage deeper thinking but interrupts it. Teachers should instead design environments where students are invited to speak, question, and collaborate. Speaking should not merely report what is known; it should serve as a method of discovery. Effective teaching practices include encouraging students to talk through problems before writing, to summarise aloud what they have read, and to engage in collaborative discussion across all subjects. Language should permeate the curriculum—not only in literature but in science, mathematics, and history. When students use language to construct understanding, they are not just learning facts—they are learning to think. Verbal thinking is more than skill; it is the foundation of cognition. Learning to speak with clarity and listen with intent are not peripheral classroom activities—they are central to education itself. Language gives shape to thought, and when students are given the space to speak freely, they begin to make sense of the world in their own words.

Visual and verbal thinkers

Some people think in pictures, others in words. While this distinction seems intuitive, Kazuo Nishimura's magnetoencephalography (MEG) study[260] gives it a neural foundation, exploring how the brain behaves differently in visual thinkers and verbal thinkers during spontaneous thought. The research 'Brain Activities of Visual Thinkers and Verbal Thinkers: A MEG Study' shows that these cognitive preferences are not just habits of the mind but rooted in distinct patterns of brain activity. Participants in the study completed a short questionnaire assessing their ability to form mental images. Based on their answers, they were grouped as strong visualisers (those who think in images) and weak visualisers (those who think in language). Then, while performing two tasks—one involving visual imagery and another requiring verbal memory—MEG data was collected to examine activity in two key brain areas: the primary visual cortex (BA 17) and Broca's area (BA 44), known for its role in language processing. The results were striking. Strong visualisers consistently showed greater activation in the primary visual cortex, particularly during the visual imagery task. This finding aligns with earlier studies that found visual mental imagery stimulates the same brain regions as actual visual perception. For those who could easily picture a scene in their mind, the visual cortex was doing much of the cognitive lifting. In contrast, weak visualizers—those who rely more on verbal strategies—displayed significantly more activity in Broca's area, even during tasks involving mental imagery. This suggests that verbal thinkers tend to translate experiences and tasks into internal narratives, engaging the linguistic centres of the brain even when asked to perform something as visual as forming a mental picture. The study focused specifically on beta-band oscillations around 25 Hz, a frequency range associated with focused cognitive activity. In visual thinkers, this rhythmic brain activity was concentrated in the visual cortex. In verbal thinkers, the rhythm shifted toward Broca's area. These patterns point to a deeper, perhaps structural, difference in how individuals process information—not simply in their conscious preferences but in the architecture of their thought. This neural divide raises questions about learning, creativity, and even communication. If someone's brain tends toward imagery while another's leans into language, their approaches to solving problems, retaining information, or expressing ideas might differ in fundamental ways. Educational strategies could benefit from acknowledging these variations. A diagram may speak more clearly to a visual thinker, while a verbal thinker might prefer step-by-step instructions or descriptive text. More

[260] Nishimura, K., Aoki, T., Inagawa, M., Tobinaga, Y. and Iwaki, S. (2015). Brain activities of visual thinkers and verbal thinkers: A MEG study. Neuroscience Letters, 594, pp.155–160. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neulet.2015.03.043.

broadly, these results suggest that mental style is not merely a personal quirk but a neurological trait. Recognising that visual and verbal thinking have different neural signatures offers a way to understand—and possibly tailor—how people learn, remember, and imagine.

1.2. Inner speech

(The voices within: Silent dialogues of the Self)

'The self is a dialogical process, constantly talking to itself in a world of voices'.

— Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics

Visual thinking

In 'Visual Thinking[261]', Rudolf Arnheim challenges the deeply rooted belief in Western philosophy that perception and reasoning are distinct and hierarchical processes. The common assumption holds that reasoning is an abstract, verbal activity, while perception belongs to the realm of passive, sensory experience. Arnheim refutes this dualism by asserting that perception itself is a form of thinking. The act of seeing is not merely registering stimuli but involves active mental operations—selecting, organising, and interpreting—that are essential to understanding the world. Thought does not begin where perception ends; it is already at work within it. Arnheim's critique traces the history of this split, starting with philosophers like Plato, who distrusted sensory perception and privileged reason as the path to truth. While Plato acknowledged in myths like the cave allegory that vision could lead toward knowledge, he still placed the senses under the suspicion of illusion. This distrust shaped educational systems that elevate verbal and numerical reasoning above the arts. Language and logic became the currency of intelligence, while visual and tactile ways of knowing were dismissed as primitive or emotional. However, as Arnheim shows, this view fails to account for how humans think. Even abstract reasoning, he argues, relies on imagery. One does not reason in pure symbols or formulas but in concrete mental pictures. Whether solving a physics problem or interpreting a painting, the mind engages spatial, structural, and visual patterns. These patterns are not decorative—they are the very architecture of thought. The arts, long marginalised as expressive or recreational, are revealed as rigorous disciplines of structured thinking. Drawing, designing, and composing are cognitive acts on par with composing arguments or solving equations. This emphasis on perception as cognition extends to Arnheim's view of language. While verbal language is often seen as the vessel of thought, he argues it is merely one of many. Words have sensory qualities—sounds, rhythms, visual shapes—but these qualities are structurally weak compared to visual forms. A melody or a geometric diagram contains more relational information than a sentence of equal length. Grammar, though abstractly systematic, offers few perceptual cues to help the mind grasp relationships among ideas. Language succeeds, not because of its sensory richness, but because it links concepts to stable, repeatable signs. Arnheim emphasises that language is not the origin of thought but a tool that helps stabilise and share ideas. Its power lies in its capacity to fix boundaries and give shape to fluid perceptions. Words carve distinctions—between cat and tiger, joy, and sorrow—and preserve them for reflection and communication. Yet even here, language leans on visual metaphor. The term 'insight', for instance, connects the act of seeing with understanding. Such linguistic habits reveal that abstract concepts are grounded in perceptual experience. Ultimately, 'Visual Thinking' urges a reintegration of the senses into intellectual life. It argues that the sharp separation between logic and imagery has impoverished both education and cognition. By

[261] Arnheim, R. (1969) Visual Thinking, University of California Press.

restoring visual perception to its rightful place as a mode of thinking, Arnheim shows that reason does not float above the senses—it is rooted in them.

Intrapersonal communication

Intrapersonal communication is the quiet, ongoing conversation people have with themselves—a form of internal dialogue that shapes thoughts, emotions, and actions. Unlike speaking with others, this communication stays within the boundaries of the individual, taking the form of mental rehearsal, reflection, self-instruction, or emotional processing. It occurs continuously and often unconsciously, guiding decision-making, regulating emotions, and constructing self-understanding. This process can be verbal, as when one silently tells oneself, 'Stay calm', or non-verbal, like mentally visualising a future event or reliving a memory. At times, it is a monologue—an inner coach or critic offering feedback. At others, it feels more like a dialogue, with different perspectives or parts of the self debating, questioning, or negotiating. These 'voices' might represent rational and emotional aspects of the self, past and future selves, or social roles internalised over time. Intrapersonal communication also manifests in externalised forms, like journaling, writing reminders, or talking aloud when alone. Though outwardly expressed, these actions still serve the internal purpose of organising thought, clarifying intentions, or resolving inner tension. It plays a role not only in solitude but also in social situations—helping people prepare for interaction, plan responses, or regulate behaviour in real time. Psychologically, intrapersonal communication is tied to self-concept and emotional health. How people talk to themselves reflects and shapes how they see themselves. Encouraging self-talk can promote confidence and resilience; self-critical or distorted internal messages, on the other hand, are often linked to anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. Cognitive-behavioural therapy frequently targets this inner dialogue, helping individuals identify and change negative patterns. Cognitively, it underpins reasoning and problem-solving. When faced with choices, people evaluate possibilities internally, test ideas, simulate outcomes, and decide paths forward—all through intrapersonal communication. In education, it supports learning through mental rehearsal, self-testing, and note-taking. In the workplace, it aids in self-monitoring, planning, and performance review. Creatively, it fuels imagination, introspection, and self-expression. Writers, artists, and thinkers often engage deeply with their own thoughts before any public expression emerges. Through inner reflection, people explore identity, values, and meaning, adjusting their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Despite its importance, intrapersonal communication resists easy observation. It unfolds silently, invisible to others, and researchers often rely on introspection or self-report to study it. Some argue it is not truly communication since it lacks an external receiver. But others see the self as both speaker and listener—a dynamic internal system that processes and responds, even if silently. Intrapersonal communication bridges thought and behaviour, emotion, and reason. It is the backstage of speech, the inner scaffolding of decision and desire. Whether whispered as encouragement, rehearsed as future dialogue, or held silently as reflection, this self-communication shapes how people live, feel, and relate to others.

Embodied cognition

Embodied cognition is the idea that the mind is not separate from the body but deeply intertwined with it. Rather than viewing thought as something that happens solely inside the head, this perspective holds that the body and its interactions with the world shape how people perceive, remember, reason, and act. The body, in this sense, is not just a vessel for the brain but an active participant in the process of thinking. This view challenges the long-standing philosophical divide between mind and body—what is often called Cartesian dualism. Instead of imagining thought as abstract computation or symbol manipulation detached from

physicality, embodied cognition emphasises that human intelligence emerges from sensorimotor experiences. How a person moves, what they touch, and where they are all feed into how they think. The roots of this idea go back to early thinkers who connected language, culture, and bodily experience. In the 20th century, phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty described perception as something grounded in lived, bodily experience—not as a passive reception of stimuli, but as active engagement with the world. In recent decades, this approach has gained momentum across cognitive science, supported by studies in neuroscience, psychology, and even robotics. Modern research offers compelling evidence for the role of the body in shaping thought. In language, for example, people understand phrases like 'grasping an idea' partly through the motor regions of the brain associated with grasping. Reading action-related words triggers subtle activations in the same areas used to perform those actions. Memory and perception also depend on bodily states—re-enacting physical movements can trigger memories more vividly, and posture can affect how people interpret emotional experiences. Behavioural experiments support these insights. Children learning math often understand concepts better when using their hands. Mimicking gestures during conversation improves recall. In social settings, subtle coordination of body movements—mirroring posture or rhythm—can enhance empathy and bonding. Emotions, too, are shaped by the body: smiling can make people feel happier, while slouching might deepen feelings of fatigue or sadness. Beyond humans, embodied cognition has inspired work in robotics and artificial intelligence. Robots that navigate the world by physically interacting with it—rather than relying on abstract models alone—demonstrate more adaptive and intelligent behaviours. These machines, like those developed by Boston Dynamics, show how cognition can emerge from feedback between sensors, limbs, and environment. Still, the theory faces criticism. Its broadness makes it hard to define precisely, and some studies—especially those on body posture and emotion—have struggled to replicate. Yet, even with these limitations, embodied cognition remains a powerful framework. It invites a rethinking of the mind as something fundamentally grounded in the lived, physical world. Rather than separating body from thought, it suggests they are co-constructed. The way one stands, moves, or breathes becomes part of how one reasons, learns, and understands. In this view, to think is also to feel, to move, and to be present in a world that responds.

Schema in philosophy

In Kant’s critical philosophy, the notion of 'schema' marks a crucial point of contact between abstract thought and sensory experience. A schema is not an image or a concrete example, but a rule—a temporal pattern—that allows a pure concept of the understanding, such as causality or substance, to be meaningfully applied to the world as it appears. Without schemata, Kant argues, categories would be empty, and intuitions blind; thought and perception would fail to meet. Kant’s problem is how to explain the application of a priori concepts—universal and necessary structures of thought—to the ever-changing, empirical flow of sense impressions. Categories like unity, causality, or necessity are not derived from experience, yet they organise it. The solution, presented in the chapter on *Schematism* in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is that the imagination provides a mediating function. It does this not by generating mental pictures but by producing temporal rules—schemata—that match the form of experience to the demands of conceptual understanding. Each category has its own schema. For example, the schema of causality is the rule that one event follows another in time in a lawful sequence. The schema of quantity involves successive addition in time—number as a temporal construction. These schemata are not static structures but active procedures that guide the mind in synthesising sensory data under the guidance of pure concepts. They are time-bound, because time, for Kant, is the form of inner sense and the condition under which all

appearances unfold. This emphasis on time marks a departure from earlier rationalist models, which often sought certainty in timeless truths. Kant argues instead that our experience is always temporal, and the mind must bring concepts into play through temporal structuring. Even mathematical concepts, like a triangle, rely on rules for constructing figures in time, not on abstract definitions alone. Importantly, schemata apply only to phenomena—objects as they appear to us—not to things in themselves. The concept of freedom or of God, for instance, cannot be schematised because they do not appear in experience. Instead, they can be represented, but this symbolic mode lacks the direct procedural connection that schemata provide. Thus, Kant draws a sharp distinction between the use of reason in understanding appearances and its speculative use beyond the limits of experience. Schemata are therefore not just theoretical constructs but functional tools that make experience possible. They ensure that categories do not float above perception, disconnected and inapplicable. Instead, through the imagination's silent work, abstract thought is anchored in the flow of time, and meaning is generated in the rhythm between the universal and the particular. This insight into the middle ground—neither pure concept nor raw intuition—represents one of Kant's most original contributions, and one that continues to shape discussions of knowledge, perception, and the conditions of understanding.

Making sense of the unfamiliar

Absolutely nothing. The philosopher Immanuel Kant died before the platypus was even known to European science, and yet in Umberto Eco's 'Kant and the Platypus', the strange creature becomes a symbol for a deeper philosophical problem: how humans make sense of the unfamiliar through language and conceptual frameworks. The platypus—part mammal, part bird, part reptile—refuses easy categorisation. That very resistance makes it a fitting metaphor for Eco's inquiry into cognition, naming, and interpretation. Eco's book is not a systematic treatise, but rather a series of philosophical essays that orbit the same set of problems: how people identify, classify, and make meaning out of things in the world. Drawing on his earlier work in 'A Theory of Semiotics', Eco revisits questions about reference, perception, and interpretation—this time with more attention to cognitive science, pragmatism, and the limits of linguistic meaning. The book is part philosophical reflection, part intellectual autobiography. It also includes playful detours—into Borges's fictional taxonomies, Marco Polo's unicorns, and even the way cats, dogs, and chairs are conceptualised across languages and cultures. The platypus becomes the ultimate test case. When early naturalists encountered the animal, it did not fit any known category. Was it a mammal, a bird, a reptile? The temptation was to label it by analogy—'water mole', 'duck-billed' something—or to reject it as a hoax. For Eco, this response illustrates the cognitive challenge of encountering the truly novel: the mind instinctively reaches for old frameworks but must stretch or revise them when they no longer fit. Eco engages both Kant and Charles Peirce to think through this problem. Kant's notion of schemata—the mental templates that mediate between sensory experience and abstract categories—provides one model. But Kant struggled to explain how these schemata are generated, especially when faced with something utterly unfamiliar. Peirce, in contrast, emphasised abduction, or hypothesis generation. When you see something new, like the platypus, you make a best guess using fragments of previous knowledge. These guesses may be wrong or provisional, but they are essential to the ongoing process of understanding. The essays reflect Eco's evolving philosophical stance, what he calls 'contractual realism'. He rejects the idea that reality is purely a mental construction, but also resists the naive belief that words directly capture the world. Instead, meaning is a negotiation—between cultural codes, sensory input, and the resistance of things themselves. The platypus is real, and its strangeness forces humans to adjust their categories to comprehend it. In Eco's view, this process is both cognitive

and narrative. The essays frequently return to the limitations of formal systems and the open-endedness of interpretation. Eco insists that even the most technical systems of reference are embedded in culture, history, and negotiation. Language does not merely reflect reality—it participates in shaping how reality is understood. This view leads him to what he terms contractual realism: a pragmatic stance that respects both the resistance of reality and the flexibility of human interpretation. 'Kant and the Platypus' is a rich, self-reflexive, and often playful work. It offers no easy answers but instead provides tools for thinking about how humans name, categorise, and understand the world—and how they stumble, improvise, and revise along the way. The platypus, awkward and wonderful, remains the book's emblem of cognition's encounter with the unexpected. To understand anything new, people tell stories—about what it is, what it resembles, where it fits. Interpretation, then, is not simply about truth or reference; it is also about making reality liveable and speakable. And so, even though Kant never saw a platypus, the platypus, in Eco's words, might need to learn about Kant just to find its place in human understanding.

Referring as contract

In one of the central essays of 'Kant and the Platypus', Umberto Eco proposes that referring—like meaning—is not simply a mechanical operation, but a social act governed by a kind of implicit contract between speakers and listeners. The act of reference, often taken for granted in everyday speech, is in fact a dynamic process that relies on shared conventions, contextual negotiation, and trust. Rather than if names and words rigidly point to stable entities, Eco draws attention to the fluidity and contingency involved in naming and pointing. Referring, Eco argues, is the act of 'designation', of identifying a specific entity at a particular moment in space and time. This distinguishes it from general descriptions or class-based attributions. For example, 'platypuses lay eggs' is a universal claim about a category, while 'that platypus is sleeping' refers to a particular creature, situated and unique. To perform such acts, language alone is insufficient: speakers must rely on shared background knowledge, cultural context, and mutual assumptions. Reference is possible not because words inherently refer, but because interlocutors agree—tacitly—on what is being referred to. This agreement does not imply certainty. Eco reminds readers that reference often involves 'haecceity', the medieval notion of the unrepeatable uniqueness of individuals. Even when two objects appear identical, they can be distinguished by their specific placement in time and space. One refers to this page, not just any. Such acts of pointing are bound to lived experience. But even here, success depends on community norms: one cannot refer to Napoleon or Aix-la-Chapelle meaningfully unless others are able to recognise the referent through shared knowledge or clarification. Eco explores examples where reference becomes a matter of 'negotiation'. Consider Montezuma, informed about horses before ever seeing one. His messengers described horses in terms familiar to their culture, allowing Montezuma to later identify them through analogy. The initial act of naming relied not on a rigid designation but on a provisional interpretive agreement—a 'contractual framework'—which enabled the referent to take form before direct experience. This logic extends to 'fictional entities'. In a comedic sketch, a character invents a creature called a 'sarkiapone', prompting his friend to infer its traits through dialogue. The animal is entirely fictitious, yet the process of referring functions: shared expectations, trust, and playful interaction allow a referent to be imagined and recognised. Even in the absence of real-world grounding, the reference is successful within the parameters of the shared linguistic contract. Eco ultimately questions rigid designator theory by suggesting that reference depends not on metaphysical anchoring but on 'community consensus'. People trust dictionaries, experts, or social usage to interpret what names like 'water' or 'Einstein' mean. When consensus shifts—as with scientific discoveries or cultural reinterpretations—the meaning of reference adjusts

accordingly. Language is not static; reference is pragmatic. Thus, reference operates not by divine fiat or metaphysical link, but through interpersonal negotiation, flexible alignment, and evolving community standards. It is, in essence, a contract of understanding—provisional, fallible, and deeply human.

Private speech

Private speech—the quiet murmurings of children as they talk to themselves during play or problem-solving—was once dismissed as cognitive noise. But as Lawrence Kohlberg and colleagues show in 'Private Speech: Four Studies and a Review of Theories[262]', it offers a window into the unfolding mind. Their research draws from theories by Piaget, Vygotsky, Mead, and Flavell, blending experimental findings with philosophical insights to reframe how this solitary speech shapes thought and development. Piaget considered private speech a sign of egocentrism. Children, he believed, had not yet grasped that others do not share their thoughts. Talking aloud in the presence of others without expecting a response seemed, to him, like a failure to understand social boundaries. According to this view, the child grows out of private speech as they become more socially attuned—leaving behind what Piaget saw as immature and solitary verbal habits. Vygotsky, however, saw it differently. He argued that private speech is not a social failure but a cognitive tool. Children speak to themselves not because they cannot relate to others, but because they are trying to guide their own thinking. It is not the absence of communication but its internalisation. In his view, private speech does not disappear with age—it becomes silent, woven into the structure of thought. Mead added a broader perspective, suggesting that selfhood emerges from social interaction. When a child speaks privately, they are rehearsing roles, internalising the voices of others. Through language, they shape the self. The shift from outward speech to inner thought, then, mirrors the transition from external dialogue to internal consciousness. Flavell contributed by showing that private speech has multiple functions and forms. His observations revealed that it serves not just cognitive purposes but emotional and social ones too. From naming toys to narrating tasks, children use speech to regulate their behaviour, soothe anxiety, and explore ideas. The studies conducted by Kohlberg and his team affirmed that private speech peaks between ages four and six, then gradually recedes as it becomes internalised. But rather than viewing this as a decline, they traced its transformation through seven stages—from playful word repetition to inaudible muttering, and finally into fully silent, inner speech. This gradual internalisation supports Vygotsky's claim that thinking is 'the mind talking to itself'. Crucially, the studies also showed that mental age and task difficulty—not sex, nationality, or even chronological age—best predict the occurrence of private speech. In other words, children speak to themselves more when a task is hard and their mind is actively working through it. Speech, in these cases, becomes a tool for thought, not just a byproduct. Far from being an irrelevant habit, private speech reveals how language and thinking merge. It is a rehearsal space for thought, a bridge between speaking to others and speaking to oneself. In that quiet dialogue, the child becomes a thinker.

Language overrated

Language often receives more credit than it deserves as the central engine of thought. In 'Visual Thinking', Rudolf Arnheim challenges this linguistic bias, arguing that language plays a secondary, stabilising role in cognition. While it does not merely serve as a label for finished thoughts, its main function is to secure and preserve ideas already formed through perceptual

[262] Kohlberg, L., Yaeger, J., & Hjertholm, E. (n.d.) Private Speech: Four Studies and a Review of Theories. University of Chicago.

experience. This conservative function affects cognition, but the claim that language alone shapes how people think—linguistic determinism—is overly simplistic and unproven. The belief that each language forms a self-contained worldview, famously put forward by Wilhelm von Humboldt, rests on introspective idealism. It assumes that the mind generates the world it perceives and that language binds perception in fixed categories. But this overlooks the more fundamental processes by which concepts arise. Ideas do not originate from words but from interaction with the environment. Language may draw a boundary around its users, but that circle is porous and can be crossed through perception, comparison, and imagination. Empirical cases often cited in support of linguistic determinism collapse under scrutiny. The Wintun language, for example, lacks singular-plural distinctions, yet this does not mean its speakers lack awareness of individuality. Similarly, the Trobriand Islanders' allegedly nonlinear perception of time may stem more from cultural practices than from syntax. Language reflects habits of mind but does not dictate them. Grammatical gender is another case in point. The gendering of nouns in languages like German does not lead speakers to view objects through gendered lenses. A table is not imbued with masculinity. The speakers of gender-neutral languages do not lack sensitivity to social distinctions. Linguistic features vary widely without necessarily producing cognitive differences. Arnheim argues that language supports cognition, but it does not drive it. Words function as auxiliary signs for perceptual structures. They provide fixed labels, which can promote conceptual rigidity and even mislead. A word like 'empty', for instance, may imply both harmlessness and danger—depending on context. Misinterpretation arises not from the word itself, but from dominant perceptual associations that language may reinforce rather than create. Concepts can and do exist without corresponding words. As James Deese has shown, there are countless categories for which English has no terms—like 'animals with legs' or 'surfaces of a room'. The absence of vocabulary does not imply a lack of understanding. Rather, it reflects the selective focus of language and culture. Ultimately, words offer a useful but limited tool for organising thought. They are not the birthplace of cognition but its echo—a scaffolding that supports mental processes shaped more profoundly by perception. Language's real power lies not in generating thought but in preserving, communicating, and refining what the mind first experiences through seeing, touching, and moving through the world.

Thinking without words

Many animals and human infants appear to think, even though they lack language. In 'Thinking Without Words[263]', José Luis Bermúdez develops a framework for understanding this kind of cognition, challenging the assumption that linguistic ability is a prerequisite for genuine thought. By drawing a distinction between associative behaviour and psychologically explainable action, he argues that some creatures act in ways best understood through beliefs, desires, and perceptions—not just reflexes or conditioned responses. These behaviours reveal a flexible intelligence, suggesting that non-linguistic beings can be true thinkers, albeit in a different register from humans with language. The heart of Bermúdez's argument lies in the difference between propositional and non-propositional thought. Propositional thought involves beliefs or desires about things—such as wanting the food that is under the log or believing the nest is safe. This kind of thinking depends on abstract concepts and generalisations that go beyond what is immediately present. In contrast, non-propositional thought operates within the bounds of immediate perception and is often shaped by spatial and sensory cues. Animals and infants may not formulate ideas in sentence-like structures, but they still organise their

[263] Bermúdez, J.L. (2011) Thinking Without Words: An Overview for Animal Ethics. Washington University in St. Louis.

experience and behaviour around goals and interpretations of their environment. This raises a critical question: what can a creature think without language? Bermúdez makes it clear that while language expands the possibilities of thought, it is not the sole basis for it. Higher-order thought—such as reflecting on one's own beliefs or understanding the thoughts of others—might require language because it involves an intentional ascent: thinking about thinking. But many forms of reasoning and behaviour occur without this recursive depth. An animal avoiding a trap or choosing the quickest path to food is not engaging in logical inference but is displaying what Bermúdez calls 'proto-conditional reasoning'—a kind of practical understanding of cause and effect that does not require symbolic logic. These insights have significant ethical implications. Traditional views often tie moral status to rationality, assuming that without language or reflective self-awareness, animals are cognitively empty. But if animals exhibit forms of reasoning, memory, and planning—if they can act based on goals, expectations, and experiences—then moral consideration must extend to these capacities. Bermúdez cautions against drawing ethical lines too narrowly, pointing instead to a spectrum of cognition that includes meaningful thought without words. Non-linguistic cognition may not allow for philosophical speculation or storytelling, but it supports a wide range of intelligent behaviours. Understanding this kind of thought broadens our view of the mind and invites deeper respect for creatures whose inner lives remain largely silent but far from simple.

1.3. Righteous words

(Conviction and cognition: The language of moral thought)

'Moral reasoning is just a post hoc search for reasons to justify the judgments people have already made'.

— Jonathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind

'People cling to their conclusions, not because they are correct, but because they fit a larger story about who they are'.

— Dan Kahan, Cultural Cognition Project

Righteous mind

Jonathan Haidt's 'The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion' investigates a fundamental paradox: why people, who are generally motivated by morality, can so vehemently disagree on moral and political matters. The book opens with Rodney King's haunting plea—'Can we all get along?'—not as a nostalgic call for harmony, but as a question that continues to trouble societies fractured by ideological and cultural divisions. Haidt proposes that the key to this riddle lies not in facts or arguments, but in the architecture of the human moral mind. Haidt begins by challenging the Enlightenment ideal that people are rational moral agents who arrive at conclusions through reason. Instead, he argues that moral judgments arise primarily from intuition, not deliberate reasoning. Reason, in his model, serves more as a press secretary than a judge—its function is not to discover moral truths, but to defend the conclusions that intuition has already reached. This idea is encapsulated in his central metaphor: the mind is like a rider on an elephant, where the rider represents reason and the elephant represents intuition. The rider thinks he is in control, but mostly he just rationalises where the elephant goes. This insight helps explain why debates on moral and political topics are so intractable. If people's judgments are mostly intuitive, then presenting them with facts or logical counterpoints rarely changes their minds. Arguments, in this view, are tools for

persuasion and defence, not vehicles for truth. This also accounts for the emotional intensity and perceived irrationality that often accompany moral disputes. A major part of Haidt's project is to expand the reader's understanding of morality beyond the narrow focus on harm and fairness. Western liberal thought, he argues, tends to moralise these two dimensions while dismissing others—such as loyalty, authority, and sanctity—as outdated or irrational. Yet cross-cultural research reveals that these neglected moral 'taste buds' are central in many societies. Haidt introduces the idea that morality, like taste, is plural. Just as the human tongue has multiple receptors, human morality operates across several innate dimensions. Ignoring this diversity not only narrows understanding but also deepens polarisation. The second part of the book explores the evolutionary origins of morality. Haidt draws on the theory of multilevel selection to show how both individuals and groups have shaped human nature. While individuals are motivated by self-interest, groups that cooperate effectively tend to outcompete those that do not. Morality evolved, therefore, as a set of mechanisms that bind individuals into cohesive groups. But this same moral glue that promotes cooperation within groups also fosters division between them. This is Haidt's third key insight: morality both binds and blinds. It unites people around shared norms and identities while closing them off to alternative viewpoints. This groupish tendency has deep evolutionary roots. Unlike other primates, humans exhibit an extraordinary capacity for shared intentionality—the ability to collaborate on common goals by forming shared mental representations. This capacity gave rise to everything from hunting parties to religious rituals, enabling the formation of large-scale societies. Over time, a process of gene-culture coevolution reinforced these behaviours. Practices that promoted group cohesion—such as norms of purity, taboos, and loyalty—became biologically advantageous, selecting for individuals more attuned to their group's moral code. The final chapters of the book offer a hopeful, if cautious, way forward. Haidt does not call for a moral relativism that dismisses disagreement as meaningless. Instead, he encourages people to recognise the legitimacy of different moral frameworks. Moral disagreement, he suggests, becomes less toxic when people understand that others are not evil or stupid, but responding to different moral intuitions. This perspective invites humility, curiosity, and the possibility of more productive dialogue. Morality cannot be reduced to a single principle. Haidt's pluralistic view resists the tendency to elevate one dimension—such as care or fairness—above all others. The full spectrum of human moral psychology must be considered. Understanding that people may be equally righteous in radically different ways does not eliminate conflict, but it can temper the self-righteousness that so often accompanies it. If people are, as Haidt puts it, '90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee', then the challenge is to make peace with both natures. The chimp fights for individual status and reward; the bee sacrifices for the hive. Only by acknowledging both can societies hope to balance liberty with cohesion, reason with loyalty, and individual rights with shared values.

Hive switch

In his account of basic training during World War II, historian William McNeill described the strange, euphoric sensation that came from marching in synchrony with his fellow soldiers. It was, he later wrote, an 'enlargement of the self', a state in which individuality seemed to dissolve into the rhythm of the group. The experience was not intellectual but bodily—muscular, collective, and deeply emotional. McNeill called this phenomenon 'muscular bonding' and proposed it as a foundation for human cooperation, especially in situations like war where self-interest must give way to the unity of the group. Jonathan Haidt builds on this idea in 'The Righteous Mind', suggesting that human beings are not merely self-interested individuals but also have a latent capacity to become 'groupish'. He calls this transformative capacity 'the hive switch'—a biological and psychological adaptation that allows people to shift

from self-focused to group-focused modes of being. While most animals live entirely within the logic of the individual, humans are capable of moments in which they act, feel, and think as part of a larger whole. This switch is not always on, but it can be activated under certain conditions, enabling collective joy, shared identity, and even sacrifice for others. The hive switch appears in ancient rituals and modern subcultures alike. It is present in synchronised dance, in religious ceremony, in military drill, and in ecstatic communal gatherings. The anthropologist Emile Durkheim coined the term 'collective effervescence' to describe the heightened emotional state that emerges during these shared experiences—an energy that lifts individuals out of their private lives and into the sacred life of the group. The sensation is not merely metaphorical. It is tied to neurobiological changes—especially the release of oxytocin, the so-called 'bonding hormone', and the activity of mirror neurons that allow people to empathise and imitate one another's actions and emotions. Importantly, Haidt emphasises that the hive switch is not universally good. It promotes altruism, solidarity, and belonging—but only within the group. The same mechanisms that bind people together can also intensify division, hostility, and cruelty toward outsiders. Religion, for instance, can be both a source of moral community and a tool of exclusion and violence. The hive switch does not discriminate; it merely intensifies the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Modern secular societies have largely lost touch with the kinds of rituals and symbols that activate the hive switch. Yet they still produce functional equivalents. Haidt describes the spectacle of American college football as a secular ritual with unmistakably religious features: symbolic dress, coordinated movement, rhythmic chants, collective joy, and sorrow. Fans become participants in a moral community, one that bonds them together not through doctrine but through synchronised attention and shared emotion. The hive switch flips when individuals join in singing a fight song or mourning a lost game—not for personal glory, but for the team, for something larger than themselves. What the hive switch shows is that humans crave belonging not only as a social convenience but as a moral and spiritual necessity. It explains why people find profound meaning in shared experiences, from music festivals to religious revivals to national parades. The group offers not just identity but transcendence. One becomes more than oneself, even if briefly. This phenomenon may have evolved as a mechanism of survival, giving an edge to groups that could suppress selfishness and act in unity. But it has also become a source of aesthetic, emotional, and moral richness. In times of social fragmentation, understanding the hive switch is essential. It shows that individualism, while vital, is only part of the human story. Without spaces to feel absorbed into something larger, people grow anxious, isolated, and cynical. The revival of secular rituals—public celebrations, civic ceremonies, collective art—could help reactivate this dormant human faculty. These rituals need not imitate religion in belief, but they must match it in intensity, structure, and communal purpose. The hive switch, then, is not a flaw in human psychology but one of its most sublime capacities. Properly understood, it offers a path toward deeper cohesion without the need for dogma. It reminds people that the fullness of human life is not achieved in isolation but in the synchrony of movement, feeling, and meaning with others. The question is does the hive switch still works in the mass society of megacities?

Moral politics

The divide between conservatives and liberals in American politics cannot be explained merely through policy disagreements or rational argument. According to George Lakoff in 'Moral Politics[264]', the root of this polarisation lies in two conflicting moral worldviews that structure how people understand right and wrong. These worldviews shape political beliefs at a deep, mostly unconscious level. People do not simply choose policies based on facts; rather,

[264] Lakoff, G. (2016) Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think, University of Chicago Press.

they evaluate those facts through moral metaphors grounded in life experience and cultural narratives. Over time, these metaphors solidify into neural patterns, forming distinct moral systems that make opposing views seem not just incorrect, but immoral. Lakoff argues that morality in politics is not relative or whimsical, but structured by underlying models of the family. Conservatives tend to adopt what he calls the 'Strict Father' model, where moral behaviour is equated with discipline, authority, and self-reliance. In this framework, the world is dangerous and competitive, and the role of the father—or government—is to instruct children right from wrong through punishment and reward. Help should only go to those who have earned it; dependency is seen as moral failure. In contrast, liberals tend to embrace a 'Nurturant Parent' model, grounded in empathy, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Here, the goal is to support others so they can flourish, and care for the vulnerable is a moral imperative, not a weakness. These competing models inform everything from economic policy to healthcare, immigration, environmental protection, and criminal justice. For example, progressive support for social programs is not based on an abstract belief in big government, but on a moral commitment to care and fairness. Conservative resistance, on the other hand, stems from a belief that such programs erode personal responsibility and moral order. When viewed through this lens, many political arguments are not truly about policy efficiency or evidence, but about deeply held beliefs about what kind of person one should be and what kind of society is morally good. One of Lakoff's most provocative claims is that facts themselves are not enough to change people's minds. Most thought—around 98%—is unconscious, and moral worldviews shape how people perceive and interpret information. When facts clash with one's worldview, they are often ignored, distorted, or dismissed. This helps explain why so many people hold views that seem resistant to empirical evidence, such as denying climate change or dismissing structural inequality. But this is not limited to conservatives; liberals, too, often ignore findings from cognitive science, if presenting data and logic should persuade rational people. This belief fails to account for the cognitive mechanisms by which meaning is formed. Because moral worldviews are metaphorically structured, framing is crucial. If you frame taxation as a form of theft, it becomes immoral to raise taxes. If you frame it as a way of paying dues to a shared community, then it becomes an act of civic responsibility. These metaphors are not optional rhetoric—they are the substance of thought itself. Therefore, political debate is not just about arguments, but about activating the right metaphors and conceptual frames in people's minds. Lakoff's work urges a rethinking of public discourse. To bridge ideological divides, one must understand and respect the moral logic of others—even if it seems alien. Only then can political dialogue move beyond accusation and manipulation toward genuine understanding.

Truth that fits

The way people understand truth and morality is often shaped more by metaphor and experience than by strict logic or formal definitions. In 'Moral Politics', George Lakoff challenges the traditional view of truth as something absolute, objective, and universally accessible. He argues that truth is always relative to conceptual systems—and those systems are largely metaphorical in nature. What counts as 'true' depends not on some neutral mirror of reality but on how a statement fits into the shared metaphors, categories, and experiences that people use to make sense of the world. Much of this conceptual scaffolding remains unconscious. People rarely notice the metaphors they live by, such as 'argument is war', 'time is money', or 'life is a journey'. These metaphors shape how experiences are categorised and understood, often making them feel like literal truths. But they are not neutral or universal. They reflect cultural patterns and physical interactions—what Lakoff calls 'experiential gestalts'. Even the language of emotion, morality, and politics is deeply metaphorical, yet people often mistake these projections for inherent truths. Philosophy, traditionally committed to objectivity,

has often dismissed metaphor as literary decoration or imprecise expression. Yet Lakoff shows that metaphor is not merely about language—it is central to cognition. The belief in a single, objective truth has long been a hallmark of Western thought, but Lakoff contends this is both unrealistic and damaging. It grants undue power to those who define dominant metaphors: politicians, religious leaders, advertisers, and media. When a society holds objectivism as a sacred ideal, whoever controls the language effectively controls the truth. Truth matters not because it mirrors some absolute reality, but because it helps people survive, function, and relate. Knowing where to find food, how to navigate relationships, or when to trust others depends on accepted truths—practical understandings grounded in lived experience. These understandings are built through projection and categorisation. People impose boundaries, directions, and features onto the world—like seeing a forest clearing as a container or giving a rock a 'front' and 'back'. These projections do not exist in nature; they arise from human perspective and purpose. Categories also play a crucial role in truth. For example, whether something is called a 'chair' depends on context—what serves as a chair at a picnic may not be suitable for a formal dinner. Truth is contingent on how categories align with context, function, and intention. Saying someone is 'a great cellist' may obscure other equally true aspects of that person's identity. The truth of a statement is never just about correspondence—it is about fit, coherence, and usefulness within a particular frame. Even metaphorical statements can be true in this framework. Saying 'inflation has gone up' involves metaphors like 'more is up' and 'inflation is a substance'. Such projections are not arbitrary; they structure understanding in meaningful, culturally coherent ways. Likewise, calling an argument a 'battle' makes sense within a metaphor that sees persuasion as conflict. This experientialist account of truth combines several elements: correspondence (statements must fit situations), coherence (they must align with a conceptual framework), pragmatism (they must work in lived experience), and realism (they are constrained by cultural and physical reality). But this realism is not absolute—it is shaped by how people interact with the world. Objectivity, then, becomes a social ideal rather than a metaphysical fact. Lakoff's model offers a third way between objectivism and radical subjectivism. It recognises that while truth is not fixed or absolute, it is not arbitrary either. People do not invent reality at will, but they do interpret it through metaphorical structures grounded in bodily and cultural experience. By understanding this, one can begin to see political and moral conflicts not as irrational disagreements but as clashes between incompatible metaphorical systems—each with its own sense of what is 'true'.

Philosophy in the flesh

Traditional philosophy has long assumed that human reason is disembodied, conscious, and literal—a pristine instrument for discovering universal truths. But findings from cognitive science fundamentally challenge this view. In 'Philosophy in the Flesh[265]' Geroge Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that the mind is not a detached rational processor but an embodied, largely unconscious, metaphorical system. This radical revision of how humans think undermines the foundations of much Western philosophy and calls for a new framework that reflects how minds work. First, reason is not abstract or universal—it is bodily. What people call rational thought emerges from physical processes: neural structures shaped by perception, motor skills, and evolutionary pressures. The very idea that concepts like time, self, and morality are grasped through logical deduction or introspection collapses under evidence showing how deeply these ideas are entangled with sensory experience. Even mathematical reasoning is grounded in bodily metaphors, such as 'moving forward in time' or 'building' an argument. Thought is not

[265] Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999) Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought. New York: Basic Books.

outside the body; it is the body interpreting itself through experience. Second, most thought is unconscious—not in the Freudian sense of repression but in the sense that most of the mental activity occurs below awareness. People do not consciously decide how to interpret grammar, decode facial expressions, or understand metaphors; these are managed by automatic cognitive systems. One does not consciously process that 'more is up' (as in 'prices are rising') or that 'love is a journey' (as in 'our relationship has hit a dead end')—these mappings emerge from embodied experiences. As a result, much of what seems like 'intuitive truth' is instead the result of ingrained conceptual metaphors rooted in physical interaction. Third, abstract thought is not literal or purely logical—it is metaphorical. This is perhaps the most disruptive insight. The idea that humans reason through formal logic or deductive chains is an illusion. Instead, people use metaphors derived from bodily experience to structure abstract domains. For instance, arguments are treated as war ('he attacked my point'), and time is seen as money ('you're wasting my time'). These metaphors are not just linguistic flourishes; they are how concepts are understood at a cognitive level. Every moral system, political ideology, or philosophical framework draws on such unconscious metaphoric scaffolding, meaning that claims to neutrality or universality are illusory. These three findings—embodiment, unconscious thought, and metaphorical reasoning—reshape how philosophy must be practiced. They reveal that classic conceptions of the self, morality, or mind found in Descartes, Kant, or utilitarianism are not wrong in every detail but founded on mistaken assumptions about how thinking works. For example, the rational autonomous subject of Enlightenment philosophy assumes a disembodied agent making conscious, logical decisions. But this figure is a fiction; in reality, cognition is shaped by biases, metaphors, and bodily experiences that vary by culture and individual history. A new approach to philosophy must begin not with a priori speculation but with an empirical understanding of cognition. Philosophers must integrate knowledge from neuroscience, linguistics, and psychology to ground their inquiries in how people experience and conceptualise the world. Concepts like causality, free will, and truth can no longer be defined solely through logic or linguistic analysis—they must be re-examined through the lens of embodied cognition. This does not mean abandoning philosophy, but rethinking its method and purpose. Introspection and reasoned debate remain valuable, but only when used alongside an awareness of cognitive constraints. Philosophy in this new mode becomes a critical reflection on the limits of thought itself—not a search for transcendent truth but a mapping of how human minds construct and interpret meaning. In doing so, it becomes more humble, more interdisciplinary, and more attuned to lived experience. This vision of philosophy moves beyond speculation and abstraction. It asks people to see themselves not as pure intellects but as thinking bodies—creatures of metaphor, habit, and emotion. Only by embracing this vision can philosophy remain relevant in the age of brain science and cognitive inquiry. In sum, philosophical ideas are not cold abstractions. They are shaped by bodies, brains, and cultural narratives. Recognising this does not undermine philosophy but grounds it more deeply in human life. Thought itself is metaphorical, and philosophy, when reframed through cognitive science, becomes not less rigorous, but more human.

Embodied realism

'Philosophy in the Flesh[266]' follows the philosophical journey to understand reality and truth has evolved across centuries—from the intuitive realism of the Greeks to the representationalism of Descartes, and now toward an embodied view grounded in cognitive science. What unites these efforts is a fundamental human desire to know the world and one's

[266] Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1999) Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought. New York: Basic Books.

place in it. But how humans think, and how that thinking is shaped by the body, has become central to redefining what is meant by 'truth' and 'realism'. Ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle, assumed a direct realism: the belief that perception connects humans to the world without mediation. The mind did not merely reflect reality; it grasped its essence. For them, knowledge was as real and present as the objects it apprehended. This perspective unified being and knowing—ontology and epistemology—and made no distinction between world and mind. That unity was shattered by Descartes. In asserting a divide between body and mind, he introduced representational realism: the idea that humans do not access the world directly but only through mental images or representations. Knowledge became a mirror, and truth a matter of internal symbols matching external reality. Over time, this model became more abstract, reducing thought to a system of symbol manipulation detached from bodily experience. It reached its extreme in twentieth-century computational theories of mind, where reason was envisioned as operating like software running on hardware—disembodied and purely formal. Cognitive science has decisively challenged this model. Embodied realism asserts that cognition arises not from a detached mental system, but from the biological, sensory, and interactive capacities of the human body. Concepts are not symbols floating in mental space, but tools for coping with and navigating a world to which people are physically and evolutionarily attuned. Truth, then, is not correspondence in the classical sense, but a form of embodied understanding—a fit between a human's conceptual structure and the world they inhabit. Embodied realism affirms that the world exists independently of any single observer and that people engage with it successfully, but it denies the assumption that there is one absolute way to understand or represent it. Knowledge is shaped by bodily interactions, cultural practices, and evolutionary history. The same reality can yield different truths depending on the context and purpose of inquiry. For instance, people see colours as properties of objects in everyday life, but science tells them they are outcomes of neural processing and environmental conditions. Embodied realism holds that both are valid forms of truth, grounded in different modes of understanding. Rather than reducing this position to relativism, embodied realism proposes a pragmatic realism. It accepts that humans bring interpretive frameworks to experience but insists those frameworks are constrained by bodily capacities and shared environments. Core categories—such as objects, spatial relationships, and causal interactions—are grounded in sensorimotor experience and shared across cultures. They enable communication, cooperation, and scientific progress, even as languages and metaphors evolve. Metaphors, in fact, are central to this cognitive account of truth. Far from being rhetorical devices, they are fundamental to thought itself. Humans understand love as a journey, time as money, and knowledge as vision not because of arbitrary poetic choices, but because such metaphors map abstract domains onto embodied experiences. Metaphors guide moral reasoning, scientific modeling, and even philosophical reflection. Without them, much of abstract human thought would be impossible. This shift has deep implications for philosophy. Classical debates about reality, knowledge, and truth have assumed a literalist model of reason: that truth is what fits the world, and thought should reflect it without distortion. But if reason is metaphorical and shaped by bodily experience, then philosophy must adapt. It can no longer rely solely on deduction or logic to reach conclusions about universals. It must become an empirical and interpretive practice—one that acknowledges the human form as both the ground and limit of understanding. Embodied realism thus opens a path toward metaphysical pluralism. There is not one truth, but multiple levels of truth arising from different perspectives—phenomenological, scientific, pragmatic. What unites them is not a disembodied mirror of reality, but a shared structure of embodied cognition. Rather than undermining objectivity, this

view redefines it as coherence within humanly accessible frameworks, grounded in the interaction of body, mind, and world.

The purpose of memories

In Pascal Boyer's essay 'What Are Memories For?[267]' memory is not simply a recording device for the past. Rather than preserving a perfect archive of events, memory evolved as an adaptive tool that supports behaviour, identity, and social coordination. As Pascal Boyer explains, the function of memory is not to honour history but to inform action—guiding people through the present by referencing what has worked or failed in the past. Biologically, the brain retains experiences not for nostalgia, but because certain environments reward organisms for drawing on previous encounters. Yet the usefulness of remembering depends on context. In changing or unpredictable conditions, memory can mislead; in stable environments, it becomes a survival advantage. Humans, living in semi-stable and highly social environments, have developed a complex memory system to negotiate their surroundings—not just to recall but to imagine, predict, and adapt. Among memory's most puzzling features is episodic recall—the vivid re-experiencing of specific events. Unlike semantic or procedural memory, which supports general knowledge and skills, episodic memory allows people to mentally revisit unique situations. This 'mental time travel' enables simulations of future scenarios, giving memory a predictive function. It helps people plan, avoid past mistakes, and understand what others might do. The ability to imagine consequences, especially in social contexts, gives episodic memory its evolutionary edge. Beyond planning, memory plays a crucial role in personal identity. Autobiographical memory weaves individual episodes into coherent narratives. These life stories are neither fixed nor complete but actively shaped by one's goals and sense of self. Children do not form structured autobiographical memories until they can reflect on themselves as continuous beings. This self-awareness allows past events to be folded into a moral and emotional framework—a story of 'who I am' and 'how I came to be'. Importantly, these memories are not static snapshots. They are reconstructed every time they are recalled. The mind reshapes past experiences to suit present needs—emotional, social, or cognitive. This does not mean memory is always inaccurate, but that it is selective and interpretive. Such flexibility is a feature, not a flaw. It enables individuals to reinterpret events, sustain hope, revise regrets, and update self-understanding. Memory also has a collective dimension. Shared narratives—about history, ancestry, trauma, or triumph—bind individuals into cultural groups. Collective memory is not stored in a vault of facts, but maintained through repeated telling, ritual, and symbols. These shared memories often prioritise meaning over accuracy, shaping group identity and moral vision. While this can foster solidarity, it also creates tensions, as different groups remember the same events in conflicting ways. Ultimately, memory is a dynamic process: it supports imagination, consolidates identity, regulates emotions, and sustains culture. It is not a mirror of the past, but a cognitive resource for navigating the future. The question 'What are memories for?' cannot be answered by scanning neurons alone—it must consider how memory works in lives, relationships, and societies.

Tradition as truth

As Pascal Boyer notes in 'Tradition as Truth and Communication[268]', in anthropology, tradition has often been treated as a background assumption rather than a phenomenon

[267] Boyer, P. (2009) 'What Are Memories For?', in Boyer, P. and Wertsch, J.V. (eds) Memory in Mind and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[268] Boyer, P. (1990) Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse, Cambridge University Press.

deserving its own theoretical explanation. This oversight is striking, considering how central traditional practices, myths, and rituals have been to the discipline's founding ethnographies. The works of Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard explored traditional societies at length, yet they rarely dissected the mechanisms of tradition itself. Despite anthropology's preoccupation with the traditional, it lacks a coherent theory of tradition as a cognitive and communicative process. One of the fundamental issues is that the term 'tradition' is often used too broadly. From kinship structures to belief systems, a vast array of institutions are grouped under this label. But resemblance to a few classic examples does not guarantee analytical clarity. Just as science would falter if it attempted to theorise about 'rectangular objects' or 'white animals', anthropology risks vagueness when it treats tradition as a catch-all category. To be useful, the concept must be narrowed: not everything inherited from the past qualifies. The focus should be on those social acts where truths are communicated and legitimated through ritual and repetition. Boyer's work turns away from written traditions to examine oral practices—those cultural transmissions enacted face-to-face through speech, gesture, and shared experience. Here, tradition is not something stored but something performed. It exists in the act of telling, citing, repeating, and reenacting. The emphasis is on interaction, on the moment when knowledge or belief is conveyed and received, with reference to past occurrences that validate its truth. Crucially, this view treats tradition not as a passive inheritance but as an active reconstruction. It is not simply conserved but constantly remade in the present. This raises important psychological questions: what happens in the minds of those who transmit and receive traditions? Traditional anthropology often presumes the existence of shared mental models, but seldom tests how such models might function cognitively. Boyer argues that any serious theory of tradition must consider the psychological mechanisms involved in memory, attention, and categorisation. There are two common ways in which psychology has been integrated into anthropology. The first borrows directly from experimental psychology, applying tested theories to ethnographic data. The second—the more widespread approach—relies on intuitive speculation, treating the mind as a 'black box' and attributing behaviour to vaguely defined mental processes. Boyer criticizes this latter method, which he sees as masking ignorance behind empty terms such as 'conservatism', 'cultural models', or 'symbolic systems'. Instead, he proposes a third path: grounding anthropology in cognitive science to generate hypotheses that are testable and specific. A central idea in this framework is that tradition must be understood through its repetition. But repetition, too, is misunderstood. It is not simply the reiteration of ideas or beliefs; it is the reactivation of social interactions with recognisable forms. The form of the act—its language, gestures, timing—becomes memorable and repeatable. This repetition does not result from inertia but from the way humans process and store interactional patterns. Rather than relying on abstract theories of 'worldview preservation', the theory centres on observable, communicative events. This applies equally to traditional categories. Take, for example, concepts like 'mana' or 'evur', found in various cultures. These terms are often vague or resistant to definition, yet they play a vital role in social discourse. Their meaning is not fixed but shifts according to who speaks, in what context, and to what purpose. Boyer distinguishes three registers of discourse: everyday talk, gossip, and expert speech. In each, the same term may be used differently, and its authority varies. Experts—such as shamans or ritual specialists—do not rely on refined theories but on accumulated experience. Their credibility stems from memory and practice, not formal definition. Such concepts challenge both the structuralist notion of 'empty signifiers' and the intellectualist assumption that cultural terms represent coherent, shared theories. Instead, these categories work through partial overlap, emotional resonance, and pragmatic flexibility. They are not defined but demonstrated, not agreed upon in the abstract but enacted in context. In conclusion, Boyer's cognitive approach

reframes tradition as a kind of communication: one that operates through repetition, memory, and performative acts. Rather than treating tradition as a static relic of the past, it must be studied as a dynamic interaction shaped by psychological constraints and cultural conventions. What counts as tradition is not merely what is old, but what is made meaningful through interaction—what is repeated, recognised, and believed in the moment of its telling.

Right hemisphere

Language is more than grammar and vocabulary. While the left hemisphere has long been associated with the nuts and bolts of linguistic function—syntax, phonology, and lexical access—the right hemisphere plays an equally vital but often overlooked role in making language meaningful in context. In their study 'The Role of the Right Hemisphere in the Apprehension of Complex Linguistic Materials[269]', Wendy Wapner, Suzanne Hamby, and Howard Gardner examine how damage to the right side of the brain affects narrative understanding, emotional nuance, and the capacity to make sense of layered or unexpected content. The researchers administered a detailed series of language-based tasks to patients with right-hemisphere lesions and compared their performance to that of left-hemisphere-damaged patients and two control groups. What they found was not a collapse in basic language skills—these patients could still recognise syntax, pronounce words clearly, and even recall sentences verbatim. But the life had gone out of their speech. They struggled to organise story elements, misunderstood emotional cues, and often failed to recognise when a story made no logical or emotional sense. Narrative, in this light, is not simply a sequence of events but a cognitive effort to weave together space, emotion, time, and expectation into something coherent. Right-hemisphere-damaged individuals found this difficult. When asked to rearrange shuffled story sentences into logical order, their answers veered off-course. They often offered justifications for absurdities instead of rejecting them, showing a diminished sense of plausibility and an inability to resolve contradictions. The emotional dimension was even more striking. In stories that relied on subtle shifts in feeling or unspoken tensions, these patients often misread characters' motives or applied rigid logic to scenes requiring empathy or ambiguity. Their responses were technically correct in a literal sense, but they lacked warmth or flexibility. Similarly, when asked to select punchlines for jokes, they either missed the twist or interpreted the humor as a critique of behaviour, failing to recognise the comic structure of setup and release. It was not that they did not understand language—it was that they could not step back from the literal surface and appreciate tone, irony, or contradiction. Even comparisons with aging control groups—who may experience cognitive slowing—revealed clear differences. Older adults might embellish or forget, but they still understood narrative purpose and maintained a sense of moral or emotional trajectory. Right-hemisphere patients, by contrast, often descended into disconnected or fragmented accounts. These findings reframe how one thinks about linguistic comprehension. The right hemisphere appears critical not for word use but for how words fit into broader frameworks of meaning: narrative structure, emotional resonance, and context-sensitive interpretation. Without this, language remains technically correct but experientially flat. Meaning, it turns out, lives in the integration—not just the form—of language.

[269] Wapner, W., Hamby, S. and Gardner, H. (1981). The role of the right hemisphere in the apprehension of complex linguistic materials. Brain and Language, 14(1), pp.15–33. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/0093-934x(81)90061-4.

2. PHENOMENOLOGY

2.1. The language phenomenon

(The speaking body: Phenomenology and the birth of expression)

'Speech does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it'.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception

'The body is not an object in the world, but our means of communication with it'.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible

Study of experience

Phenomenology is the study of experience as it is lived, prior to its translation into theories, categories, or measurements. Rather than asking what things are or how they can be proven to exist, phenomenology begins with how they appear to consciousness—how the world shows itself through perception, memory, thought, and language. At its core, it is a philosophical attempt to describe the structures that make experience intelligible, without reducing it to abstractions or presupposing a split between the subject and the world. This attention to appearances, to the immediacy of the lifeworld, defines the method and spirit of phenomenological inquiry. Originating in the work of Edmund Husserl, phenomenology emerged in response to what he saw as the crisis of modern rationalism—the tendency of science and philosophy to overlook the basic fact of lived experience. Husserl urged a return 'to the things themselves', calling for the suspension of assumptions about external reality (a process he named epoché) to examine consciousness as it presents itself. He introduced concepts like intentionality—the idea that all consciousness is directed toward something—and eidetic variation, a method of imagining changes to a phenomenon to reveal its essential features. These tools were designed not to build a system but to uncover what he called the invariant structures of experience. Yet phenomenology quickly expanded beyond Husserl's framework. In 'The Prose of the World', Maurice Merleau-Ponty advanced a vision of phenomenology grounded in embodiment. For him, the body is not a container for thought but the very condition of perception. We do not inhabit a detached mind observing the world from a distance; rather, we are always already engaged in it through movement, sensation, and gesture. Perception is not a passive reception of stimuli, but an active interpretation shaped by bodily orientation and context. Language, in this view, is not simply a set of signs we apply to thoughts but a spontaneous, expressive act—the continuation of perception by other means. This embodied view of phenomenology places speech at the centre of meaning-making. Language is not a transparent conduit between minds; it is a terrain where meaning takes shape. Speaking is not merely naming but revealing. Words are sedimented with history and experience, and each act of expression is a reshaping of what has been said before. Merleau-Ponty sees language as the medium in which the world becomes visible to us and to others, a process always incomplete and open-ended. Martin Heidegger, another key figure in the phenomenological tradition, shifted the focus from consciousness to being. In 'Being and Time', he redefined phenomenology as an inquiry into what it means to exist. For Heidegger, humans

(or Dasein) do not first think about the world and then act in it; they are always already situated in a world of concerns, tools, and relationships. Understanding, for him, is practical before it is theoretical. This existential turn in phenomenology emphasised temporality, finitude, and the historical nature of meaning. Across these thinkers, phenomenology reveals itself not as a fixed doctrine but as a way of attending to experience—of noticing what is usually passed over in the rush to explain or measure. Whether through the analysis of perception, the articulation of pre-verbal understanding, or the description of how speech carries thought forward, phenomenology invites one to inhabit the ambiguity and richness of lived life. It reminds philosophy that before there are concepts, there is presence; before there are facts, there is meaning.

Merleau-Ponty on language

In his 1947–48 course 'Language and Communication' at the Université de Lyon, Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlined a powerful critique of how science and philosophy were thinking about language. His argument revolved around three key points: the limits of scientism, the inseparability of thought and language, and the importance of the speaking subject. Although his lectures were never officially published, they were preserved in student notes and later analysed by Hugh J. Silverman[270], who traced their impact on Merleau-Ponty's mature philosophy of expression. Merleau-Ponty's first target was scientism—the belief that scientific method alone can explain human experience. In psychology, he objected to experimental approaches that treated stimulus and response as isolated data points. He preferred the work of thinkers like Köhler, whose research with primates suggested that perception and problem-solving should be viewed holistically, as a restructuring of a field, not as linear cause, and effect. Likewise, in linguistics, Merleau-Ponty was wary of reducing speech to phonetics or brain mechanics. Instead, he turned to Saussure's distinction between 'langue'—language as a formal system—and 'parole'—individual speech. For Merleau-Ponty, this tension reflects a deeper truth: language is both structural and temporal, a rule-bound system, and a lived practice. Language, he argued, is not a tool that expresses a fully formed thought, nor is thought something that precedes its articulation. Rather, they emerge together. Thought is not waiting inside the mind to be dressed in words; it is formed in and through the act of speaking. Against Pavlovian behaviourism and the empiricism of early psychology, he insisted that language is intentional—that it is always directed toward meaning. Even when the words are habitual or automatic, they are steeped in context and history. And in moments of 'true speech', when something genuinely new is said, language reveals not just meaning but the very act of meaning-making. This led to his third point: communication is not the simple transfer of information but a shared, embodied act. The speaking subject is not an isolated mind projecting thoughts into space but a body in the world, already immersed in a web of meaning. We understand others not by decoding messages, but by silently 'reaccomplishing' their intentions—by living into their words. Language becomes a kind of shared gesture, a resonance between bodies, a form of coexistence. Meaning arises not from signs alone but from the encounter between subjects. These ideas would shape Merleau-Ponty's later work, especially 'The Prose of the World', where he further dismantled the notion of language as a closed system. Language, for him, is always tied to existence. It does not simply reflect the world but participates in it, embodying a tension between structure and spontaneity, between silence and expression. To speak is to enact a relation—to the self, to others, and to a world that is never fully given but always becoming.

[270] Silverman, H.J. (1985) 'Merleau-Ponty on Language', in Silverman, H.J. (ed.) Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy: Transforming Contemporary Thought. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 67–89.

The prose of the world

To begin 'The Prose of the World[271]'(1973) is to risk falling into its spell—the very prose it seeks to unravel. Merleau-Ponty does not offer an introduction in the conventional sense but a philosophical gesture, where language and thought converge in a movement of mutual emergence. The text does not frame itself from the outside; it opens from within, inhabiting the tension between expression and silence, between saying and meaning. Language is not a tool here but a phenomenon—an event of visibility and understanding. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology avoids the abstraction of pure concepts. Language, for him, is not a neutral system of signs waiting to be decoded. It is a texture of lived experience. The voice does not merely transmit thought; it incarnates it. Each utterance, like a gesture, arises from a body situated in the world. Thus, speaking is a way of seeing and showing, not simply naming. The philosopher does not analyze language as an object but listens for what it discloses about being. Beneath the grammar of statements lies a deeper grammar of presence—what he calls the 'prose' of the world. This prose is not the opposite of poetry, but the fabric of communication before it hardens into code. A statement like 'it is raining' seems transparent, yet it already enacts a certain world: a shared weather, a background of sense. In contrast, poetry, prayer, and narrative do not merely embellish communication; they return language to its expressive origin. They resist the flattening of signs into sheer transmission. For Merleau-Ponty, this flattening reaches its limit in the scientific ideal of a pure language, a perfect algorithm free from ambiguity. Such language dreams of a correspondence between symbol and world so exact that interpretation vanishes. But this dream is a refusal of speech's essential opacity. The ideal of a universal language, underlying many rationalist traditions, presumes that truth can be extracted from language and fixed in symbols. It seeks a pre-linguistic logos, a divine code beneath speech, visible in thought itself. But Merleau-Ponty shows that this ideal collapses when confronted with the materiality of language—the voice, the gesture, the silence between words. Expression is never purely transmission. The meaning of a word changes with its tone, its context, its rhythm. Even the most logical proposition speaks differently when whispered or shouted. The writer, too, believes in a best expression—one phrase among many that perfectly fits the thought. But this belief is born of surprise when words come not from calculation but from the body's own familiarity with the world. The thought was not fully formed before it was spoken; it came into being with its phrase. Thus, language does not wrap a finished idea. It creates it. Even the purest signs—mathematical, algorithmic—fail without an interpreter. Meaning is never in the sign alone but in the encounter. A signal only speaks if someone listens. Language is not the substitution of signs for thoughts; it is the unfolding of thought in the space between people. A message, however clear, means nothing without this shared space. The death of a loved one is not real because it is known, but because it is lived. In this way, language touches the world not as a mirror, but as a hand. The illusion of a transparent language gives rise to the paradox: language reveals, yet the more we try to capture it, the more it slips away. Every attempt to grasp meaning as an object leads to the suspicion that communication is a lie. But Merleau-Ponty refuses this despair. He affirms the voice not because it is clear but because it speaks from the thickness of the world. Language is not a thing that exists but a happening, a passage—a moment where the world shows itself in words, only to retreat again. It is this movement that makes philosophy possible and keeps its voice alive.

The indirect language

Language and painting may seem like distant forms of expression, but both engage in the same fundamental task: translating the silent, pre-reflective world into something that speaks.

[271] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973) The Prose of the World. Northwestern University Press.

With the idea of 'the indirect language', Maurice Merleau-Ponty draws this parallel not to collapse the difference between visual and verbal art, but to illuminate how both forms of expression reshape perception into meaning. Neither painter nor writer reproduces reality as it is; rather, they make it visible—or intelligible—through composition, gesture, and form. Language, like colour, does not point to meaning from outside, but unfolds it from within. This idea unsettles the classical notion that language should be clear, precise, and direct, like a well-polished tool. Against the fantasy of a 'pure language' that would transparently express thought or truth, Merleau-Ponty proposes that true communication is always indirect. Words, like brushstrokes, do not merely convey ideas; they evoke, distort, resonate. Style—whether in literature or painting—is not an embellishment but the very form in which something becomes visible. Language does not operate by representing objects already there; it brings them into presence through the act of speaking or writing. Modern art, as Merleau-Ponty notes, offers a striking illustration of this shift. Where classical painting aimed at faithful representation, modern painters began to explore the unseen—what is felt, sensed, intuited beneath appearances. The visible is not simply what meets the eye, but what emerges through a particular way of seeing. Likewise, modern literature breaks with the assumption that language must transmit a stable message. Writers become aware of language's opacity, its resistance to total clarity. Expression is not about overcoming ambiguity but dwelling within it. Meaning, rather than being given in advance, arises through the encounter between the work and the one who receives it. This emphasis on indirection also reveals a deeper philosophical claim: that perception itself is expressive. We do not first see the world and then translate it into words or images. Perception already carries meaning, shaped by our embodiment, history, and affective orientation. The painter does not impose order on chaos but responds to a world already speaking, albeit silently. Language, then, is a continuation of this responsiveness. To speak is not merely to code an inner thought but to respond to a world that asks to be said. The indirectness of expression is not a weakness but a condition of depth. A finished work is never truly complete; its meaning unfolds over time, through repetition, interpretation, and dialogue. Each new context reactivates its latent possibilities. Language, like art, opens a space where individual and collective histories intersect, where the past is reanimated and the future glimpsed. In this light, Merleau-Ponty's meditation on language becomes a meditation on human presence itself. Speaking, painting, writing—these are not secondary activities but ways of inhabiting the world and offering it to others. Indirectness is not the failure of expression, but the very mode through which meaning is made.

Saussure's phenomenology

Ferdinand de Saussure is most often remembered as the founding figure of structuralist linguistics. His 'Cours de linguistique générale' introduced the influential distinction between signifier and signified, along with the idea that the relationship between the two is arbitrary. This became the cornerstone of twentieth-century structuralism, widely adopted in fields from anthropology to psychoanalysis. But as Beata Stawarska argues in 'Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology[272]', the Saussure we inherit from the 'Course' may not reflect the depth and complexity of his original thinking. The 'Course', published after Saussure's death by his students Bally and Sechehaye, has long been treated as authoritative. Yet it was assembled from lecture notes and recollections, shaped by editorial choices that emphasised system over subject, synchronic structure over diachronic flux. This editorial bias played a significant role in canonising Saussure as a structuralist. But as Stawarska shows, Saussure's

[272] Stawarska, B. (2015) Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology: Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics. New York: Oxford University Press.

unpublished manuscripts—the 'Nachlass'—tell a different story. There, the speaking subject is not erased but actively present, and language is not merely a system, but a phenomenon embedded in time, society, and experience. The standard reading of Saussure sets up a sharp contrast between structuralism and phenomenology: one focuses on language as an impersonal system; the other on consciousness and lived experience. But this opposition may be overstated. Stawarska reveals that Saussure was already thinking in terms that blur the boundaries between structure and subjectivity. He saw language not only as a network of differences but also as an activity shaped by the speaker's historical and social context. Meaning arises not solely from contrasts between signs but also from the temporality and embodiment of speech. Saussure's well-known critique of the 'nomenclature' model of language—where words are simply labels for pre-existing things—already points toward a more dynamic theory of meaning. He insists that language does not name a pre-given reality; instead, it carves out concepts through the system of oppositions internal to language itself. But in the 'Nachlass', this position is extended. The arbitrariness of the sign is shown to be not absolute but relative to shared histories and practices. Language is not a closed structure; it evolves, sedimented through use yet constantly reanimated by the speaking subject. This view has profound implications for how we understand communication. Rather than picturing language as a static system imposed on passive speakers, Saussure—when read through Stawarska's lens—emerges as a thinker of expression and intersubjectivity. Language is a space of tension between constraint and creativity, between the given and the emergent. Speakers do not control language absolutely, but neither are they merely its puppets. They inhabit it, reshape it, improvise within it. Revisiting Saussure through his 'Nachlass' thus enables a reconciliation between structural and phenomenological approaches. It suggests a philosophy of language in which form, and subjectivity are not opposed but entwined—language as both a structure and an event, both sediment and speech, both history and presence.

To the things themselves

Phenomenology, often viewed as a philosophical method rooted in introspection and subjectivity, has in fact evolved into a diverse and dynamic tradition with significant implications for the social sciences. Maurice Roche, in 'Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences[273]', argues that despite internal divergences, phenomenology remains anchored by a shared commitment: to remain faithful to the phenomena as they appear, not as they are theorised or reduced by external frameworks. This central principle—'to the things themselves'—distinguishes phenomenology from both positivist science and classical empiricism. Where empiricism focuses on observable facts, phenomenology turns its attention to lived experience, where perception and meaning are inseparable. It does not abandon reality but reorients the inquiry: what matters is not what reality is presumed to be, but how it is encountered and made meaningful by human consciousness. This orientation is traced the idea of intentionality: the notion that consciousness is always directed toward something. A thought, a fear, a memory—each points beyond itself. This directedness forms the core of phenomenological analysis. There is a distinction between introspection, often misleadingly passive, and 'inner perception', which he saw as an immediate awareness of mental activity. Consciousness, in this view, is active and relational, always in motion toward objects, situations, or others. Husserl transformed these insights into a philosophical project he called pure phenomenology. Seeking to establish a rigorous foundation for all knowledge, Husserl introduced the method of epoché, or bracketing. This meant suspending the 'natural attitude',

[273] Roche, M. (1973) 'Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences', Human Studies, 1(2), pp. 123–142.

the uncritical assumption that the world exists independently and self-evidently. By setting aside this assumption, Husserl aimed to uncover the essential structures of experience. Yet, while this method aspired to objectivity through reflection, it was later criticised for neglecting the bodily, historical, and social dimensions of life. This critique found voice in the existential phenomenology of thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Sartre replaced Husserl's focus on essences with a philosophy of freedom and self-awareness. Consciousness, for Sartre, was not a static receptacle but a restless project—a being-for-itself, defined not by what it is but by what it is not yet. This existential freedom, however, comes with anxiety and bad faith, as individuals often seek refuge in social roles that obscure their freedom. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, emphasised embodiment. In 'Phenomenology of Perception', he argued that perception is not a mental representation of the world but an active bodily engagement with it. The body, for him, is not an object but the subject of perception. This reconfiguration brought phenomenology closer to lived experience, to the 'Lebenswelt' or life-world, and made it relevant to questions of language, social interaction, and culture. It is here that phenomenology becomes particularly fruitful for the social sciences. As Roche shows, Alfred Schutz extended Husserl's ideas into sociology, exploring how shared meanings and typifications allow people to navigate everyday life. Rather than seeking universal laws, Schutz focused on the structures of meaning that arise in intersubjective communication. Language, in this framework, is not just a medium for transmitting information but a practice through which social reality is constructed and maintained. Phenomenology thus challenges the assumptions of scientific objectivity and insists that any meaningful inquiry into society must begin with lived experience. It shows that language, thought, and perception are not private phenomena but inherently social. This insight allows phenomenology to bridge the gap between philosophy and empirical inquiry, offering tools for analysing how people inhabit, interpret, and co-construct the world they share.

Living body of language

Horst Ruthrof's 'Husserl's Phenomenology of Natural Language[274]' explores how meaning arises through imagination, intersubjectivity, and cultural embeddedness. Drawing from Husserl, Ruthrof argues that natural language is not a mere system of signs, but a dynamic field of intentional acts shaped by both individual consciousness and communal norms. Central to this approach is the idea that linguistic meaning hinges on the ability to imagine, and be imagined, in the act of communication. For Husserl, meaning is not grounded in truth or reference to external objects. Instead, it arises through the 'Vorstellbarkeit'—the capacity of linguistic expressions to evoke mental images or imagined scenarios. This imaginability has two facets. First, speakers must form vivid internal images in response to language. Second, language must convey content in a way that others can imagine and re-enact. These two operations occur simultaneously, making meaning an event that binds subjects together through shared imaginative acts. While early in his career Husserl focused on the internal logic of subjective acts of meaning, his later writings increasingly acknowledged the social nature of language. Ruthrof shows how Husserl began to see even solitary linguistic expression as rooted in communal expectations. Meaning is never fully private; it unfolds within the 'speech community' and carries with it a kind of social obligation. This is what Husserl called 'Zumutung', the demand placed on individuals by collective linguistic norms. Husserl's turn to intersubjectivity marks a shift from viewing language as a personal system to treating it as a communal process of imaginative reconstruction. The social reality of language is not just

[274] Ruthrof, H. (2021) Husserl's Phenomenology of Natural Language: Intersubjectivity and Communality in the Nachlass. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

external, as in social convention, but internalised through the intentional structure of each speech act. Every expression presupposes a shared world in which meanings can be made intelligible. Hence, phenomenological inquiry must not only describe inner experiences but also trace the relational processes through which language gains significance. Ruthrof interprets this through a tripartite ontological framework: language partakes of materiality (its physical sounds or inscriptions), ideality (the abstract structures and categories), and intentionality (the shared acts of consciousness that generate meaning). Husserl's phenomenology insists that it is this third layer—intentionality—that makes language what it is: a lived and imaginative process. Even syntax and grammar are not merely structural forms but sedimented experiences, crystallised over time through communal use. The concept of 'Sprachleib', or the 'living body of language', captures this complexity. Language is not a dead code but an embodied, moving, and socially inhabited phenomenon. Each word carries a tone, a direction of intention, and an implicit social horizon. The 'Ton' of an utterance—its mood, affect, and implied stance—contributes to its meaning just as much as its propositional content. Husserl's contribution, as Ruthrof argues, is to place this imaginative, intersubjective, and cultural reality at the centre of linguistic theory. Language, then, is not an external system we use but a social mode of being that binds people through shared acts of imagining and understanding.

Phenomenology of language

James E. Dublin's 'Language as Expression of the Upright Man: Toward a Phenomenology of Language and the Lived-Body[275]' presents a powerful synthesis of phenomenological thought, grounding language not in abstract systems but in the bodily structure of human existence. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Straus, Dublin situates language as a living, expressive movement of the upright body—a gesture of Being made possible by the unique human capacity for embodied transcendence. At the core of this analysis is the idea that the body is not an object among others but the site of meaning. Merleau-Ponty insists that it is not consciousness, but the lived-body that structures experience. Language emerges from this corporeal foundation, not as a detachable tool but as an extension of the body's perceptive and expressive powers. Even the most abstract linguistic forms are rooted in bodily gestures and postures. The phrase 'my last breath', for example, carries an evocative meaning not because of its grammar, but because it condenses bodily experience into communicable form, transforming fleeting life into symbolic permanence. Heidegger's famous claim that 'language is the house of Being' finds resonance here. Dublin emphasises that words are not inert signs but events that expose, stretch, and reveal. Etymology, in this view, is not a historical curiosity but a means of recovering the forgotten layers of meaning sedimented in language. The body, like language, harbours this depth. It is both the subject that speaks and the object that resonates. In Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, this dual structure becomes 'l'Etre sauvage', the wild Being from which all distinctions—subject and object, body, and word—emerge. Language thus reflects a paradox: it transcends time and the body yet is inseparable from the body's presence in the world. The upright posture becomes a symbol of this transcendence. Straus and Griffith describe how standing frees the hands for gestural expression and elevates the human gaze, allowing reflection and symbolic articulation. Dublin draws on mythological and ritual imagery—trees, limbs, trunks—to show how the human body is metaphorically and structurally embedded in the natural world, and how language draws from this embeddedness to speak beyond it. Sensory experiences like taste, sound, and breath are reinterpreted as expressions of a unified body-world relation. Taste, which joins interior and

[275] Dublin, J.E. (1972) 'Language as Expression of Upright Man: Toward a Phenomenology of Language and the Lived-Body', Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 2(2), p. 141.

exterior, becomes a metaphor for judgment. Laughter, sighs, gasps—each sound carries affective weight, revealing the world not as a collection of facts but as a field of significance. Language does not simply name these expressions—it arises with them. Dublin concludes that language is not separate from Being but a reflection of it. Beneath every conceptual term lies a bodily resonance. Language is the continuation of the body's silent gestures, shaped by uprightness, extended into meaning. It is through this lived-body, poised between the earth and the symbolic, that speech gains its vitality.

2.2. The language of the self

(Subjectivity in speech: Saying 'I' and being heard)

'To say 'I' is already to enter into a story not wholly one's own'.

— Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself

The self and its language

In 'The Self and Its Language[276]', Harold A. Durfee and David F. T. Rodier gather a range of philosophical essays that take on the subtle and elusive problem of the first-person pronoun—'I'. At once a grammatical sign and a metaphysical cipher, the 'I' reveals how tightly language is bound to subjectivity. This small pronoun encapsulates centuries of reflection on selfhood, from Descartes' 'cogito' to Foucault's 'death of the subject', but it also resists reduction to mere philosophical abstraction. The 'I' speaks not only of interiority but of the very conditions by which interiority becomes speakable. The volume explores how the self is shaped, expressed, and destabilised through language. Some contributions adopt the phenomenological view of consciousness as intentional and directed, while others draw from analytic philosophy, existentialism, psychoanalysis, and theology. Across these diverse perspectives, a shared concern emerges: the self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process—reflective, embodied, and ethically entangled. Topics include the moral foundations of intersubjectivity, the tension between individual freedom and inherited traditions, and the role of bodily expression in unconscious life. The relation between presence, absence, and Being is examined alongside the idea that the self arises through its participation in historical, linguistic, and cultural structures. Art and language are presented as spaces in which existence is disclosed, and the self becomes expressible. Later discussions foreground the linguistic turn, emphasising the performative and self-referential nature of first-person language. Ultimately, the self is shown not to pre-exist language, but to be formed within it—always situated in a shared world of meaning and response. By tracing the paths where language and selfhood converge, this volume reveals the self not as something hidden behind words but as something constituted by them. Language is not merely how the self expresses itself; it is where the self emerges. These essays remind the reader that to say 'I' is already to enter a network of meanings, histories, and responsibilities. The 'I' is never solitary—it always speaks to and through others.

Language and being

Stephen A. Erickson's 'Language and Being: An Analytic Phenomenology[277]' explores the intersection of language, meaning, and human experience by using Heidegger's early

[276] Durfee, H.A. & Rodier, D.F.T. (eds) (1989) Phenomenology and Beyond: The Self and Its Language. Contributions to Phenomenology, Vol 3. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

[277] Erickson, S.A. (2015). Language and being: an analytic phenomenology. [online] Philpapers.org. Available at: https://philpapers.org/rec/ERILAB [Accessed 20 Jul. 2025].

philosophy as a point of departure. Erickson approaches three enduring philosophical questions—What is meaning? What is the philosophical role of language? What is a human world?—with the aim of clarifying their interrelation and philosophical significance. Rather than treating these questions in isolation, Erickson views them as converging at a conceptual crossroad that demands both phenomenological sensitivity and analytic rigor. Heidegger's work, especially 'Being and Time' and 'An Introduction to Metaphysics', serves as both a foundation and a challenge. Erickson does not merely follow Heidegger but interrogates his central assumptions, attempting to translate Heidegger's more opaque ideas into a vocabulary accessible to both analytic and phenomenological traditions. The goal is not to simplify but to render more visible the stakes of Heidegger's thinking on Being and its entanglement with language. One of Erickson's main concerns is the way the Western philosophical tradition, rooted in Greek ontology, has reified the concept of Being. Heidegger argues that this reification—treating Being as if it were a distinct entity—originates in the linguistic structures of Greek and German thought. For instance, the infinitive form 'to be' (sein) is inherently indeterminate, much like verbal nouns such as 'dreaming' or 'falling'. Heidegger suggests that this grammatical indeterminacy reflects the philosophical emptiness that arises when Being is mistaken for a stable concept. According to him, completing a sentence like 'Being is…' feels odd because the subject Being resists objectification; it slips out of linguistic precision. Erickson finds this observation central: language not only reflects but subtly shapes our understanding of metaphysical problems. While Heidegger appeals to Greek etymology to critique modern ontology, Erickson draws parallels with thinkers like J.L. Austin, who also recognised how language's history conditions its philosophical uses. Yet where Austin advocated for conceptual multiplicity, Heidegger believed that a single dominant model—originating in Greek metaphysics—has silently governed Western thought's view of Being. This model has shaped not only metaphysical assumptions but also how language functions within philosophical discourse. Erickson contends that if Being has been misunderstood due to linguistic habits, then philosophical progress requires a linguistic turn that is both historical and analytic. Understanding Being thus becomes inseparable from understanding how language encodes meaning. He follows Heidegger's critique with the aim of constructing an alternative framework—one that acknowledges the historical burden of inherited concepts while striving toward a more reflective, perhaps pluralistic, approach to language and ontology. What emerges is a call for a revisionary practice in philosophy: one that does not discard Heidegger but redeploys him. Erickson's analytic phenomenology seeks to clarify not only what Being means but how such meaning becomes possible through the grammar, history, and lived use of language.

Epistemology of language

Cheng-hung Tsai's 'On the Epistemology of Language[278]' rethinks a foundational assumption in linguistic theory: that to speak a language competently is to possess some form of internal knowledge about that language. Rather than asking what kind of knowledge a speaker must have, Tsai asks what it means to be a speaker at all. The shift is subtle but profound. Language, on this view, becomes less about rule-following and more about a lived, interpretative relationship shaped by character, cooperation, and social sensibility. At the centre of Tsai's critique is Donald Davidson's well-known 'dispensability thesis', which argues that

[278] Tsai, C.-H. (2006) 'On the Epistemology of Language', Southern Journal of Philosophy, 44(4), pp. 677–696.

communication does not rely on pre-shared semantic rules. According to Davidson, speaking is not like consulting a mental grammar. Instead, meaning emerges in context, through dynamic negotiation between speaker and listener. Davidson's concepts of 'prior theory' and 'passing theory' capture this—what one brings to a conversation versus what one constructs in the moment. Successful communication, then, depends not on fixed rules but on interpretative flexibility. This flexibility, however, cannot be arbitrary. Tsai addresses the so-called 'Humpty Dumpty problem'—the worry that without rules, meaning collapses into solipsism. But Davidson's point is not that anything goes. Rather, meaningful speech arises from a shared commitment to understanding. When Humpty Dumpty says a word means 'just what I choose it to mean', he rejects that commitment. In contrast, the humor of Mrs. Malaprop lies in her unintentional deviation from linguistic norms—she errs, but her intentions remain intelligible. The difference lies in virtue. This is where Tsai introduces his virtue-theoretic model of linguistic competence. Borrowing from virtue epistemology, he argues that speaking well involves interpretative virtues—dispositions that aim at mutual understanding. These include charity (interpreting others generously), interpretability (making oneself understandable), sincerity (speaking truthfully), and cooperation (aligning with shared goals). Competent speakers are not those who possess a rulebook, but those who engage with others in ways that cultivate trust and intelligibility. In this model, linguistic knowledge is not foundational but emergent. It is not something one must have in advance, but something that develops through practice, attention, and moral sensibility. Rules of language, far from being fixed, are the sedimented results of countless virtuous interactions. From this angle, the epistemology of language is less about decoding syntax and more about understanding the ethical and social habits that make language possible. Tsai's contribution is to reconnect the study of language with human character. By shifting the focus from formal structures to interpretative virtues, he provides a compelling account of how meaning arises—not through strict adherence to rules, but through the interplay of intention, trust, and shared purpose.

Language and phenomenology

In 'Language and Phenomenology[279]', Chad Engelland explores the deep and often overlooked relationship between speech and experience, proposing that phenomenology has a unique contribution to make in the philosophy of language. Where analytic approaches tend to analyze meaning through propositions, reference, or truth-conditions, phenomenology returns to lived experience, asking how language arises from and discloses the world as it appears to consciousness. Phenomenology, at its core, is the study of appearance—how things show themselves to us. Language is not simply a vessel for labelling those appearances but part of how things appear at all. Engelland notes that while figures like Wittgenstein and Quine are standard in linguistic philosophy, phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty treat language less as a formal system and more as an existential structure—integral to how humans inhabit and interpret the world. Husserl's 'Logical Investigations' marks a foundational shift by treating meaning as intentional—shaped by how the subject intends or directs experience. Language, therefore, is not added to thought afterward, but entwined with it from the beginning, as the very medium through which meaning becomes articulate. Yet phenomenology also seems strangely silent on language. As Hans-Georg Gadamer observed, despite its reliance on speech, phenomenology often treats language as a background condition rather than a primary topic. Husserl focused largely on logic and ideal meanings, bracketing the social and contingent aspects of speech. Heidegger, too, was sceptical of traditional philosophies of language, preferring to speak of logos as an originary revealing, a way of 'letting

[279] Engelland, C. (ed.) (2020) Language and Phenomenology. New York: Routledge.

be'. This reluctance, however, should not be mistaken for disinterest. Instead, Engelland shows that phenomenology seeks to avoid reifying language—to resist treating it as a thing, a system of signs detached from experience. Rather than objectify language, phenomenologists trace it back to its source in lived, embodied communication. For Merleau-Ponty, this source lies in the body. The spoken word is not merely emitted by a neutral speaker—it emerges from a gesturing, sensing body in the world. Speech is a bodily act, not reducible to grammar or phonetics. When a child learns to speak, they do not memorise rules—they inhabit gestures, tones, rhythms. This corporeal grounding of language allows phenomenology to reconnect linguistic meaning with the intersubjective structure of experience—how people share a world through shared gestures and speech. Engelland emphasises the importance of 'pre-predicative' experience—those levels of meaning that come before full propositions or judgments. For example, the look on a loved one's face, a tone of voice, a gesture of hesitation: these are forms of meaning that precede and inform language. Rather than discard these as ineffable, phenomenology tries to describe them, to let them be seen as meaningful. Language becomes the unfolding of such meanings into form, not their replacement. This approach has profound consequences. It reframes philosophical questions: not 'What is the meaning of this sentence?' but 'How does this word come to mean what it does, in this moment, for these people?' Meaning is no longer timeless or abstract, but historical, embodied, and intersubjective. Recent developments have extended this view further, integrating insights from linguistics, developmental psychology, and hermeneutics. Merleau-Ponty's unfinished work on expression and silence, as well as Heidegger's reflections on poetic language, suggest that language not only conveys but also shapes the world. Poets, like philosophers, do not merely describe—they disclose new ways of seeing. Engelland's work thus opens a space where language is not just studied but lived. Phenomenology, in this light, becomes a listening as much as a speaking—a way of attending to the world through the subtle vibrations of speech, silence, and gesture.

The emergence of meaning

In 'Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language[280]', James M. Edie offers a compelling account of how meaning arises not from abstract structures or empirical facts alone, but from the lived, situated use of language. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, Edie resists the reduction of language to formal logic or syntactical codes. Instead, he frames it as a dynamic, embodied process—one through which humans create, disclose, and transform meaning in real time. His approach balances subjectivism and objectivism by showing how personal expression and linguistic norms interact, not in opposition, but in mutual dependency. Phenomenology has long sought to account for the interplay between consciousness and the world. Edie applies this task to language by examining how meaning emerges through la parole—actual speech acts—rather than solely from la langue, the system of linguistic rules. While structuralists emphasise language as a self-contained system, Edie insists that meaning is also generated anew in every utterance. It is the creative tension between sedimented structure and living expression that gives rise to the richness of linguistic life. Edie begins by revisiting Edmund Husserl's theory of 'pure logical grammar'. Husserl proposed that beneath the flux of speech lies a set of a priori laws governing meaningful expression. These structures, while ideal and universal, make possible the formation of intelligible discourse. Yet Edie critiques this emphasis on syntax, suggesting it neglects the temporal and bodily nature of speech. While Husserl's formalism secures clarity and consistency, it risks severing language from the world of perception, gesture, and lived interaction. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty brings the body back

[280] Edie, J.M. (1976) Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

into the centre of linguistic experience. For him, speech is not an abstract operation but a gestural act—words are movements of thought made visible and audible. Meaning is not fixed in signs but emerges through expressive encounters between people and their world. Edie highlights this shift as crucial: speech is neither entirely constructed nor passively received; it is enacted. The speaker does not merely select pre-existing meanings but reshapes them in context. This understanding becomes most vivid in Edie's discussion of metaphor and polysemy. Following Paul Ricoeur, Edie sees metaphor not as an ornamental feature of speech but as the engine of new meaning. Metaphors allow us to bridge familiar categories and articulate novel insights. They function as creative tools that reveal dimensions of reality otherwise hidden by literal speech. Meaning, in this view, is never simply given; it is discovered, often by bending the rules of language rather than following them. Edie's argument also redefines philosophical method. Rather than seeking an ideal language purified of ambiguity, he aligns with Heidegger's view of language as disclosure. Truth is not correspondence, but *uncovering*. The philosopher's task is not to reduce language to formulae but to interpret its unfolding—how it gestures beyond itself, invites resonance, and opens the world. This leads Edie to hermeneutics, where meaning is not static but historical, shaped by time, context, and dialogue. Each act of reading or speaking participates in an ongoing reinterpretation that sustains the vitality of meaning. Ultimately, Edie's phenomenology of language demonstrates that meaning is not an object to be retrieved but a process that unfolds within speech. Language is both constraint and freedom, tradition, and invention. It draws on a shared background of norms and expectations but remains open to rupture, transformation, and play. This duality—of form and expression, structure, and spontaneity—is where meaning emerges.

Information and reality

For centuries, science understood reality through the lens of solid matter. Newton's universe was a machine, driven by particles and predictable laws. Everything, from stars to human thought, could be reduced to motion and matter. But this classical view began to fall apart in the twentieth century. The rise of thermodynamics, relativity, and quantum theory forced scientists to rethink what the universe is made of. Slowly, matter gave way to something less tangible: information. In 'Information and the Nature of Reality[281]', edited by Paul Davies and Niels Henrik Gregersen, contributors trace this shift from physics to metaphysics. They argue that information may be more fundamental than matter or energy. As Davies puts it, perhaps the universe is not a collection of things, but of relationships, encoded in information itself. The first major break came with Einstein's relativity. It showed that mass and energy are interchangeable and that space and time are not fixed. Matter became less like billiard balls and more like ripples in fields. Yet even this left the classical idea of 'stuff' mostly intact. It was quantum theory that truly transformed the picture. In quantum mechanics, particles are not solid objects. They are probabilities, tendencies, mathematical abstractions. The wave function does not describe what a particle is, but what one knows—or does not know—about it. Information becomes central: the act of observation changes what is real. Seth Lloyd, one contributor, suggests that the universe behaves like a quantum computer. Its evolution is the processing of qubits—units of quantum information. Biology, too, is now framed in terms of information. DNA carries the instructions for life. Proteins are built from coded messages. The cell is not just a bag of chemicals—it is a processor of instructions, a semiotic system. John Maynard Smith and others in the volume argue that life is fundamentally about information storage and

[281] Davies, P. and Gregersen, N.H. (eds) (2010) Information and the Nature of Reality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

transfer, not material substance. This shift raises difficult questions. What is information, really? Claude Shannon's theory helped engineers design communication systems, but it left out meaning. Shannon information is about possible states, not what those states signify. But in biology, language, and thought, meaning matters. A signal only becomes information when someone—or something—interprets it. Terrence Deacon and Bernd-Olaf Küppers address this problem by showing how information needs context. Meaning emerges not from the signal itself, but from how it relates to a system's survival or goals. The organism does not just receive signals—it interprets them, acts on them, and reshapes its world. Information is not static. It is dynamic, tied to entropy, thermodynamics, and evolution. Finally, the book explores how these ideas might affect theology and philosophy. Arthur Peacocke and others suggest that if information underlies reality, it might be the bridge between mind and matter, science, and spirituality. God, in this view, could be understood not as a distant creator, but as the principle of order and relation embedded in information itself. In this emerging paradigm, the universe is not made of things but of messages—patterns, codes, and interpretations. Matter is what information does when it has structure. The real, at its core, is not a substance but a relation.

Belief ascriptions

In Jane Heal's 'Revisiting a Wittgensteinian Account of Belief[282]' attention shifts away from the idea that beliefs are internal, hidden mental states that can be detected or inspected. Instead, it proposes that belief is a concept embedded in public linguistic practices—something people learn to use and recognise through social training. From this standpoint, saying 'I believe that he is stupid' is not a neutral report of a private state but a performative move within a shared system of meaning. The habit of belief, then, is not about discovering a thing inside the mind, but participating in the ordinary grammar of conviction and assertion. This reframing becomes particularly helpful in addressing puzzles like Moore's paradox: 'It is raining, but I do not believe that it is raining' or 'It is raining, but I believe that it is not raining'. This utterance appears contradictory not because it expresses two conflicting propositions, but because of how belief functions performatively. When one says, 'I believe that he is stupid', they are effectively asserting 'stupidity' with an added layer of control or even ownership. Adding 'but he is not' collapses the coherence of the original act. The contradiction does not lie in factual inconsistency alone but in the violation of the norms of self-ascription. The Wittgensteinian view thus treats belief as partially constituted through first-person expression. Belief is not a pre-existing state that a speaker simply discovers and reports, but a disposition that finds its form in linguistic behaviour. This is especially clear when considering how people learn to use psychological terms. Children are not trained to observe internal mental events but to react and speak in ways consistent with community norms. Saying 'I believe he is stupid' is part of learning how to participate in a social world that values reasons, commitments, and trustworthiness. This account reconciles the apparent asymmetry between first-person and third-person belief ascriptions. In third-person contexts, belief is typically inferred from behaviour—speech, choices, expressions. In first-person contexts, however, belief can be declared without appeal to evidence. This is not because individuals have privileged access to mental mechanisms, but because, within a language-game, their avowal is constitutive. Belief is shown not by internal inspection but by participating correctly in the practice of belief-talk. A key insight of this approach is that sincerity becomes a condition of authority. If someone says, 'I believe that he is stupid', and they are sincere, the statement is treated as a definitive

[282] Heal, J. (2003) 'Revisiting a Wittgensteinian Account of Belief', in Mind, Reason and Imagination: Selected Essays in Philosophy of Mind and Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 157–176.

avowal. But if there is evidence of insincerity or confusion, the claim may lose its normative weight. Thus, sincerity and rational self-awareness form the basis of authority, not metaphysical access to private entities. This performative model aligns belief with other speech acts like promising. Just as the act of saying 'I promise' brings a promise into being, saying 'I believe' under the right conditions brings belief into its final, public form. This challenges models that locate belief exclusively inside the mind and invites a broader reflection on how language structures the inner and outer aspects of thought.

The value of true belief

In 'The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding[283]', Jonathan L. Kvanvig revisits an old question: why do we value knowledge? He starts with something simpler—true belief. If knowledge includes true belief, then understanding what makes belief valuable might tell us something about the worth of knowledge itself. Socrates, in *Meno*, claims that true belief is almost as useful as knowledge. If someone knows the way to Larissa, or merely believes it correctly, they both get there. So, the practical function of true belief—its role in guiding action—is key. When you want to relieve a headache, believing that aspirin will help gives direction. Wanting alone is not enough. Belief gets you moving. Still, belief is not always seen as good. Ancient Pyrrhonists, for instance, argued against forming beliefs at all. They proposed living without belief, guided only by appearances. Their goal was peace of mind. But Kvanvig shows that even this radical scepticism struggles to account for ordinary decision-making. Appearances can help with basic instincts, but they do not offer much for things like planning a career or navigating laws. For those, belief—about cause, effect, and possibility—is hard to avoid. A softer version, urbane Pyrrhonism, suggests we should trust belief in practical matters, but not in abstract or philosophical areas. This is not as disruptive. It sees belief as something like pain—sometimes bad, but often necessary. It does not deny belief's role in guiding us through life. Once we accept that belief matters, the next question is: why does true belief matter? Some philosophers think truth has little value. They point to theories like Bas van Fraassen's constructive empiricism, which says it is enough if beliefs match observable data. Whether they are true does not matter, so long as they work. In this view, truth is a luxury, not a necessity. But Kvanvig disagrees. He argues that truth satisfies a different kind of need—a deeper intellectual desire. Suppose a theory fits all the facts, but you later find out it is false. Even if nothing changes in practice, you will feel deceived. That feeling tells us something important. It is not just about utility. Truth speaks to the need for coherence, for integrity in our understanding. Some, like Ernest Sosa, say that truth is only valuable when it lines up with interests. A trivial truth—like the number of pebbles on a beach—does not matter unless you care about it. But Kvanvig counters that the desire for truth is general. We want the truth about what matters to us, but the value is still in truth itself. The problem lies in the context, not in truth's worth. In the end, Kvanvig defends a position that is both simple and deep. True belief is valuable—not just because it helps us act, but because it answers our intellectual needs. Truth has value, and belief gains value by aiming at it. Knowledge, then, is more than true belief—it is belief grounded in something normative: justification, reliability, or understanding. What matters is not just getting it right, but why it is right.

2.4. Psychophenomenology

(Hacking the Self: NLP and the engineering of thinking)

[283] Kvanvig, J.L. (2003) The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

'There is no failure, only feedback'.

Richard Bandler and John Grinder, Frogs into Princes

Psychophenomenology

Psychophenomenology[284] is an emerging approach that seeks to integrate elements of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and phenomenology to explore and articulate human experience in a more nuanced and structured way. Though drawn from distinct traditions—NLP from applied psychology and communication training, and phenomenology from philosophy and qualitative research—their intersection opens new possibilities for understanding how individuals perceive, describe, and transform their internal world. Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is based on the premise that there is a close connection between neurological processes, language use, and behavioural patterns. The foundation of NLP rests on the assumption that people do not react to reality itself, but to their mental maps of it. These maps are shaped by language, memory, and perception. In the end, NLP is more of a toolkit for manipulation and control than a theory. It offers techniques that some find useful—ways to notice patterns in speech or reframe problems—but it does not provide a full explanation of how communication functions. Developed in the 1970s, NLP proposes that by altering how people internally represent experiences—through sensory-based coding and linguistic framing—they can influence their behaviours, emotions, and outcomes. Core techniques in NLP include mirroring, anchoring, and reframing, which aim to align communication, build rapport, and shift unproductive mental patterns. Central to NLP is the concept of the 'map of reality', the idea that people do not operate on the world itself but on their subjective internal models of it, shaped through sensory perception and experience. Despite its popularity in coaching, self-help, and communication training, NLP has faced widespread academic criticism. Many researchers argue that its methods lack empirical validation and scientific rigor, and it is often labeled a pseudoscience. Nevertheless, practitioners report its usefulness in various applied contexts, such as public speaking, conflict resolution, and therapeutic change, where its tools for accessing and modifying internal experience can yield practical benefits. Phenomenology, by contrast, is a philosophical and methodological tradition concerned with the careful description of lived experience. Originating with Edmund Husserl and developed by thinkers like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, phenomenology aims to reveal the structures of consciousness and how individuals make sense of their world. Through techniques such as bracketing (setting aside assumptions) and detailed first-person narrative, phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of phenomena as experienced from the subject's point of view. It has become a key approach in qualitative research across psychology, education, sociology, and healthcare. Psychophenomenology emerges where these two approaches meet. While phenomenology offers a framework for rigorously describing subjective experience, NLP brings practical tools for identifying how those experiences are constructed through sensory channels, imagery, and language. In combining these, psychophenomenology attempts to deepen the inquiry into how people experience, narrate, and potentially transform their inner lives. In qualitative interviews, for instance,

[284] Tosey, P. and Mathison, J. (2010). Exploring inner landscapes through psychophenomenology. Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, 5(1), pp.63–82. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/17465641011042035.

psychophenomenology may employ NLP strategies such as eliciting sensory-based language (visual, auditory, kinesthetics) or modeling internal representations to help participants more vividly articulate their lived experience. This creates more detailed and textured accounts of personal reality, enhancing the descriptive power of phenomenological analysis. The goal is not to replace phenomenology with NLP but to enrich it through practical tools that illuminate how experiences are formed and organised in consciousness. In therapeutic contexts, this integration becomes particularly relevant. NLP techniques can be used to identify maladaptive cognitive patterns, while phenomenological inquiry allows clients to explore and reflect on the meaning of those patterns in their life-world. Together, they create space for awareness, change, and personal insight. In summary, psychophenomenology offers a hybrid approach that draws on the strengths of both phenomenology and NLP. While remaining aware of the scientific limitations and criticisms of NLP, this synthesis leverages its focus on sensory and linguistic structuring of experience to enhance phenomenological research and practice. By combining methodological rigor with experiential insight, psychophenomenology holds potential as both a qualitative research method and a therapeutic framework for exploring the intricacies of human thought, language, and consciousness.

Psychophenomenological inquiry

Psychophenomenology is a contemporary methodological innovation that combines phenomenological inquiry with tools and principles derived from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Developed primarily by Pierre Vermersch[285], psychophenomenology builds on the philosophical foundation of phenomenology, especially Husserl's focus on lived experience, but moves toward more practical and structured approaches to eliciting first-person accounts. It offers refined methods for exploring the subtleties of subjective awareness, placing particular emphasis on language, introspection, and embodiment. At the heart of psychophenomenology is the 'explicitation interview', a structured, participatory form of guided introspection designed to help individuals access detailed descriptions of conscious experience. Unlike traditional phenomenological interviews, which often rely on unstructured narrative, the explicitation interview draws on distinctions in syntax, sensory representation, and mental imagery. These elements, adapted from NLP, enhance the precision of data collection and the clarity of introspective reporting. By focusing on how individuals internally organise and articulate experience, psychophenomenology addresses longstanding concerns in cognitive science and psychology regarding the validity and utility of introspective data. The contribution of NLP to this method is significant. Although often regarded as controversial or pseudoscientific in therapeutic contexts, NLP offers useful linguistic and cognitive tools for exploring how people construct meaning. Developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, NLP is based on the premise that language patterns mirror mental structures. In psychophenomenology, this insight is applied to research interviews, where syntactical forms are used to guide attention, elicit detailed recollections, and bracket researcher assumptions. Understanding the epistemological function of language structures enables researchers to access the procedural knowledge embedded in lived experience—what Vermersch calls 'the inner landscape'. Psychophenomenology also reclaims introspection as a legitimate mode of inquiry. For much of the 20th century, mainstream psychology dismissed introspection as unreliable and unscientific. Yet Vermersch, along with thinkers like Varela, Depraz, and Petitmengin, argues that systematic introspection—guided by methodological rigor and linguistic awareness—can yield rich, nuanced data about consciousness. This approach is not simply about collecting more

[285] Vermersch, P. 2004, "Prendre en compte la phénomenalité: propositions pour une psychophenomenologie", Expliciter no. 57 (December), pp. 35-46.

information, but about achieving greater 'granularity': the ability to make finer distinctions within lived experience, revealing micro-processes and subtle transitions often lost in standard narrative accounts. Importantly, psychophenomenology remains faithful to the core phenomenological commitment to subjectivity and first-person understanding. However, it insists that precision in capturing this subjectivity depends on a sophisticated awareness of how language shapes thought. Here, NLP's contribution is not ideological but technical: its tools help operationalise introspective inquiry without overriding the participant's own framing of experience. The researcher's role becomes one of skilled guidance—helping interviewees access their own tacit knowledge through structured, reflective questioning. Psychophenomenology represents a bridge between phenomenological philosophy and applied linguistic methodology. By integrating NLP into phenomenological interviewing, it deepens the capacity to access, describe, and analyze conscious experience. As such, it offers a valuable approach for qualitative researchers, especially in fields like psychology, education, organisational studies, and consciousness research, where the texture of lived experience remains central to understanding human behaviour and development.

Enabling evocation

Psychophenomenology is a method of structured introspection developed to explore first-person experience in a rigorous and detailed way. Drawing on the philosophical roots of phenomenology, particularly the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, psychophenomenology has expanded its methodological repertoire by incorporating techniques from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). This integration has enhanced phenomenological inquiry by increasing the precision and depth with which inner experiences are accessed and described. Three key ways in which NLP contributes to psychophenomenology are: enabling evocation, using the meta-model of language, and eliciting detailed sensory representations. The first major contribution of NLP is the technique of 'enabling evocation'. In psychophenomenology, the explicitation interview does not merely ask participants to reflect on an experience but guides them to re-access it as if it were happening in the present moment. This process is facilitated through language that invites 'transderivational search'—an NLP concept describing how vague, open-ended questions lead the respondent to search internally for meaning. For instance, instead of asking 'What did you see?' the interviewer might ask, 'What do you see happening now?' This subtle shift in tense encourages participants to re-enter the memory rather than merely describe it from a distance. This re-association into experience, or what Vermersch calls 'evocation', allows participants to access vivid details, including the sensory and emotional textures of the original event. A second key NLP contribution is the 'meta-model', a typology of syntactical language patterns that reflect underlying cognitive structures. Originally developed by Bandler and Grinder, the meta-model helps interviewers identify generalisations, deletions, and distortions in a person's verbal report. By crafting questions that correspond to these patterns, researchers can probe more deeply into how experience is constructed. For example, if a participant says, 'I can't do it', the interviewer may ask, 'What's stopping you?' or 'What would happen if you tried?' Such questions reveal the internal logic and constraints shaping the person's perception. In psychophenomenology, this linguistic awareness is vital for distinguishing between raw experience and interpretive overlays, aligning with the phenomenological aim of bracketing assumptions. The third NLP-derived contribution is the systematic elicitation of 'sensory detail', including internal representations and their submodalities. In psychophenomenology, attention is given to how a person sees, hears, and feels an event internally. NLP provides a vocabulary and methodology for exploring the qualities of these inner representations—such as brightness, distance, volume, or tempo—which often shape the meaning and emotional impact of experience. This granular focus is

central to Vermersch's concept of 'granularity', the ability to make fine distinctions within experience that lead to richer descriptions and deeper insight. Together, these NLP techniques allow psychophenomenologists to ask more precise, embodied questions, access subtle shifts in awareness, and analyze transcript data with greater epistemological clarity. Importantly, psychophenomenology does not treat these recollections as literal truths but as constructions—valuable precisely because of the cognitive and affective processes they reveal. By integrating the pragmatic tools of NLP, psychophenomenology elevates introspective research into a more disciplined and effective means of understanding human consciousness.

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)

Neuro-linguistic programming[286], or NLP, began in the mid-1970s as a method for improving communication and personal development. Its founders, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, claimed that language, thought, and behaviour were interconnected in ways that could be consciously adjusted to improve one's life. Drawing from the therapeutic methods of figures like Milton Erickson and Virginia Satir, they developed models that were intended to uncover and replicate the mental habits of highly successful people. At its core, NLP is based on 'modeling', a process where one observes and copies the thought patterns and behaviours of experts. The belief is that if someone can think like a successful person, they can also achieve similar outcomes. From this idea came two central tools: the Meta-Model and the Milton-Model. The former focuses on identifying and correcting distortions in speech to access deeper beliefs. The latter promotes hypnotic, indirect language to influence the subconscious. Despite these tools, NLP has not gained acceptance in academic psychology. Many of its foundational ideas lack empirical support. Reviews of studies have shown that NLP's methods do not consistently produce results under controlled conditions. Critics argue that its theories rest on misused or misunderstood concepts from linguistics and neuroscience. For instance, NLP borrowed heavily from the work of Noam Chomsky, but Chomsky himself was not involved in the movement and has distanced his research from it. Over time, NLP evolved into more than a therapy tool. It became a major part of the self-help and corporate training industries. Figures like Tony Robbins popularised its use in business seminars and motivational speaking. However, this commercial success brought with it a dilution of standards. Practitioners began applying NLP in inconsistent ways, often exaggerating its effects, and moving even further from its original therapeutic claims. Its claim to treat psychological and even physical conditions, sometimes in a single session, has not been substantiated by rigorous studies. Nonetheless, NLP continues to be marketed for everything from anxiety reduction to sales performance. Its appeal often lies in the simplicity of its message—change your thoughts and you can change your life. This resonates with audiences looking for quick solutions or personal transformation. Some researchers suggest that NLP functions more as a symbolic system than a scientific one. It shares characteristics with folk practices and spiritual traditions, including rituals, visualisations, and the presence of charismatic leaders. Its techniques, such as anchoring positive emotions or reframing failure, resemble ideas found in other self-help philosophies. For this reason, NLP has been described by some scholars as a form of modern-day psycho-shamanism—more belief-driven than evidence-based. In conclusion, NLP started as a model for therapeutic practice but quickly grew into a commercial enterprise. Its techniques may offer value as communication tools or motivational strategies, but they remain unsupported by solid scientific evidence. As such, NLP is best understood not as a branch of psychology, but as a

[286] Bradley, E. J. and Biedermann, H.-J. (2020) 'Bandler and Grinder's Neurolinguistic Programming: Its Historical Context and Contribution', Journal of Communication Inquiry, 44(3), pp. 253–273.

cultural phenomenon shaped by optimism, marketing, and the enduring human desire for self-mastery.

Computing with words

Lotfi A. Zadeh's idea[287] of 'computing with words' represents a significant shift in how machines might process information. Rather than relying solely on numbers, this approach allows computers to operate using vague terms drawn from natural language—words like 'likely', 'far', or 'young'. People use such expressions constantly, even when making complex decisions, often without turning to exact figures. Zadeh's work aims to replicate this flexibility in artificial systems by enabling them to manipulate perceptions instead of precise measurements. Traditional computation depends on clear, numerical values. But the real world is messy. Much of human reasoning deals with things that are uncertain or poorly defined. You might describe a person as 'tall' or a chance as 'unlikely', but those terms resist exact translation into numbers. Zadeh's model accounts for this imprecision by building on fuzzy logic—a framework that allows truth to be a matter of degree, rather than all-or-nothing. In this way, computing with words offers an alternative method of reasoning when clarity is limited or when imprecision is acceptable, even helpful. The foundation of this model is what Zadeh calls the 'computational theory of perceptions'. It treats perceptions—such as distance, likelihood, or mood—as constraints that are generalised rather than rigid. These constraints are expressed through a formal language, the Generalised Constraint Language (GCL), which allows a computer to work with statements in natural language. For example, a machine might understand and act on a phrase like 'most people in Sweden are tall' by mapping it to a set of fuzzy boundaries instead of precise values. A central mechanism in this model is constraint propagation. It is the process of linking one perception-based statement to another using fuzzy rules. For instance, if you accept that 'young people tend to be energetic', and you know that 'John is young', then it is reasonable to say that 'John is likely energetic'. The strength of CW lies in this form of reasoning. It mirrors how humans think—by building approximate inferences, not exact deductions. CW also relies on the idea of fuzzy granulation. Rather than treating data as single points, it groups them into broader categories. A concept like 'middle-aged' might span many years, rather than be locked to a specific age. This makes CW particularly relevant in areas like artificial intelligence, where machines must interact with the ambiguities of human speech. Systems that use CW could better interpret instructions, infer intentions, or respond to incomplete data. While CW has been applied in areas like robotics, decision support, and natural language processing, it remains an evolving field. Its practical use is limited by challenges in efficiency and consistency, especially in large-scale applications. Still, Zadeh believes the method has the potential to shed light on consciousness itself. Since human thought is shaped by perceptions rather than only logical steps, a model that captures this fuzziness could help explain how concepts are formed, or decisions are made. Computing with words stretches the boundaries of what computation can mean. It introduces a form of logic that is less rigid, more intuitive, and closer to how people process information. As research progresses, CW may not only improve machine understanding but also offer new insights into human reasoning and the structure of thought itself.

[287] Zadeh, L. A. (1996) 'Fuzzy Logic = Computing with Words', IEEE Transactions on Fuzzy Systems, 4(2), pp. 103–111.

Guide to neurolinguistics

In 'Language and the Brain A Slim Guide to Neurolinguistics[288]' Jonathan R. Brennan explores how words, sounds, meanings, and grammar are processed in the mind. Language is one of the most distinct human traits, and neurolinguistics seeks to understand how the brain makes it possible. Although scientists do not yet have a full explanation, steady progress has been made using methods from linguistics, psychology, and neuroscience. Jonathan Brennan's book offers a concise introduction to this growing field, presenting current knowledge about how language lives in the brain. The starting point is to understand what the brain is doing during language use. Researchers often divide this into three levels. First is the computational level: what is the brain trying to accomplish? Second is the algorithmic level: how is it doing this in terms of mental steps? Third is the implementational level: what are the neurons and networks doing physically? These layers help scientists trace how speech sounds become meaningful words and how sentences are built in real time. One of the major discoveries in this field came from studies of brain injury. In the 1860s, Paul Broca studied patients who lost the ability to speak fluently but could still understand language. He identified damage in a region now known as Broca's area, located in the left frontal lobe. Later, Carl Wernicke found another region, in the left temporal lobe, linked to problems with understanding language. This led to the 'classical model' of language, which proposed a division between comprehension and production. While useful, this model is now considered too simple. Today, researchers use neuroimaging tools to study language processing in real time. These include techniques like magnetoencephalography (MEG), which tracks rapid brain activity. When a person hears a word, the auditory cortex responds almost immediately. Within 150 milliseconds, the brain begins processing the sounds. By 250 milliseconds, areas like the posterior middle temporal gyrus start mapping these sounds to meaning. This progression reveals a hierarchy of processing, from sensory input to conceptual understanding. A key focus in neurolinguistics is on lexical access—the way the brain finds the right word. The debate continues over whether words are stored as wholes or in smaller units called morphemes. Some evidence supports full decomposition, where the brain breaks down words like 'restarted' into 're', 'start', and 'ed'. Other data suggests partial decomposition, especially with irregular forms like 'went' or 'geese'. It may be that both models apply in different cases. Disorders like aphasia also provide clues. People with damage to specific brain areas may struggle with word retrieval or sentence construction, even though their thoughts remain intact. These patterns show how specific networks support different aspects of language. Some individuals, for example, lose the ability to produce fluent speech while still understanding others perfectly well. Language processing is not confined to one part of the brain. It involves many regions working together in networks. These networks connect frontal and temporal areas, coordinating the demands of sound, grammar, and meaning. Brennan emphasises that the old idea of fixed 'language centres' is giving way to more dynamic views. Language is distributed and context-sensitive, shaped by both biology and experience. Neurolinguistics remains a field in motion. While much is now understood about how words and meanings are processed, big questions remain. How do different languages affect brain structure? How does prediction shape understanding? And what does it mean for a word to 'mean' something in the mind? These are the puzzles that continue to drive the science of language and the brain forward.

[288] Brennan, J.R. (2022). Language and the Brain. Oxford University Press.

Neural representation of meaning

What does it mean to understand a word? This question lies at the heart of neurolinguistics. Words carry meaning, but how this meaning is stored and processed in the brain remains one of the biggest puzzles in language science. Jonathan R. Brennan explores this topic by examining how the brain represents meaning, suggesting it relies on both distributed networks and centralised hubs. The idea that meaning is spread across the brain is not new. As early as the 19th century, Carl Wernicke suggested that a word like 'bell' triggers not just one memory trace, but many—its sound, shape, use, and feel. Modern neuroscience confirms this. Studies on people with category-specific agnosia show that different types of concepts are processed in distinct brain regions. For example, someone might lose the ability to name animals but still name tools, or vice versa. This supports the idea that meaning is organised across multiple areas, depending on the kind of knowledge involved. Research by Jeffrey Binder and colleagues found that conceptual processing activates regions in the temporal, frontal, and parietal lobes. Further work by Alexander Huth used brain scans to map how words of different meanings light up the cortex. They discovered that even closely related words—like 'mother' and 'father'—activate unique, though overlapping, areas. This points to a finely tuned semantic system that distributes meaning across the brain in a highly organised way. But distribution alone does not explain everything. There is growing evidence that the brain needs a central place to integrate these dispersed meanings. The anterior temporal lobe (ATL) is a strong candidate. Damage to this area, as seen in patients with semantic dementia, causes gradual loss of conceptual knowledge. A person might first identify a duck correctly, then just call it a 'bird', and later only 'animal', showing a breakdown in semantic precision. Studies using transcranial magnetic stimulation support this by temporarily disrupting the ATL and observing broad impairments in word meaning tasks. Bilingual studies add another layer. When people switch between languages, the ATL still activates in response to meaning, even if the word form changes. This suggests the ATL plays a language-independent role in processing concepts, acting as a kind of semantic hub that ties together meaning regardless of the language used. A major debate in the field is whether meaning is tied to the body. The embodied cognition theory says yes—that understanding action words like 'kick' activates motor regions involved in kicking. Some experiments support this, showing that motor cortex activity increases when people read such words. However, evidence from patients with movement disorders complicates this view. People with Parkinson’s disease or apraxia, for instance, can still understand action words, despite having trouble moving. This suggests that motor involvement may help but is not necessary for understanding. Instead, an alternative view argues that concepts, while rooted in sensory experience, become abstracted over time. According to this grounded symbolic approach, meaning starts in the body but is eventually processed in higher-level brain systems like the ATL. In the end, the brain does not treat meaning as a single thing. It processes different types of knowledge in different places but also brings them together when needed. The study of meaning in the brain continues to evolve, combining insights from brain imaging, language disorders, and computational modeling to better understand how people know what words mean. Another trend is the move toward studying language in real-life situations. Language is more than grammar and rules—it also involves gestures, social cues, and context. Neurolinguistics is beginning to explore how the brain handles communication, not just isolated sentences. It asks how the brain turns sound into meaning, how children learn language so quickly, and why only humans seem to have full linguistic ability. Each answer leads to more questions. But in that ongoing search, it helps uncover what language reveals about the human mind.

The scientific validity of NLP

NLP has been widely marketed as a breakthrough in communication and therapy. Yet, the scientific evidence supporting it is minimal. In 'Neurolinguistic Programming: Nonsupportive Data or an Untestable Theory?[289]', Christopher F. Sharpley examines the gap between theory and proof, concluding that NLP lacks the empirical backing required for credibility in psychological practice. Sharpley reviewed fifteen studies in his 1984 paper and found no consistent support for NLP's core claims. The most fundamental of these was the idea of 'preferred representational systems' (PRS), which suggests people favour certain sensory channels—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—when processing information. NLP assumes that by identifying and mirroring a person's PRS, therapists can improve communication and outcomes. However, when tested under controlled conditions, this concept did not hold up. A broader review of forty-four studies revealed a similar pattern. Only six studies supported NLP principles. Five gave mixed or unclear results. Thirty-three found no support at all. These numbers raise serious questions about the foundation of NLP, especially its core techniques like PRS identification and predicate matching. Defenders of NLP, like Einspruch and Forman, argued that researchers misunderstood the theory or failed to apply it correctly. They suggested poor training or misinterpretation of its methods led to the negative outcomes. But Sharpley pointed out a troubling implication: if a technique only works under highly specific conditions or with expert practitioners, then its value in general therapeutic practice becomes doubtful. Further issues include the reliability of PRS itself. Studies show people do not consistently demonstrate one dominant sensory mode. Eye movement, which NLP claims can reveal internal thought patterns, also shows no meaningful correlation to cognitive processing in empirical research. Moreover, predicate matching—using language that reflects a client's PRS—has not been shown to produce better therapeutic results than standard methods. Some people still report positive experiences with NLP. But these effects may not stem from the model itself. Clients who expect improvement might benefit through placebo. Therapists enthusiastic about NLP might influence outcomes simply by building stronger rapport. And many NLP techniques borrow from broader therapeutic practices already known to be effective, like reframing or mirroring. These are not exclusive to NLP. What is left is a system that feels helpful to some but does not withstand scientific testing. NLP's generalisation of its methods to all contexts, despite weak data, suggests it functions more as a psychological fad than a rigorous framework. Like certain branches of psychoanalysis, NLP has gained popularity in practice but not in peer-reviewed research. Until its supporters offer reliable, repeatable evidence, NLP remains an unverified tool. The most practical path for therapists is to use methods grounded in cognitive-behavioural or evidence-based therapy rather than rely on techniques built on unstable ground.

Psychology and manipulation

Neuro-Linguistic Programming, or NLP, emerged in the 1970s through the work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder. At first, it was framed as a therapeutic model, designed to analyze and replicate the speech and behaviour of successful psychotherapists. Over time, it moved far beyond its original scope. Today, NLP appears in sales training, self-help seminars, politics, and advertising. Some people see it as a breakthrough in understanding communication and change. Others regard it as a pseudoscientific system built more on illusion than evidence. At the heart of NLP is the idea that language and behaviour reflect and shape mental processes. By altering speech patterns or body language, one can supposedly change the way people think, feel, or act. Bandler and Grinder studied figures like Milton Erickson and Virginia Satir, aiming

[289] Sharpley, C. F. (1987) 'Neurolinguistic Programming: Nonsupportive Data or an Untestable Theory?', Journal of Counseling Psychology, 34(1), pp. 103–107.

to extract and formalise their techniques. The result was a loosely structured set of methods and strategies designed to influence perception and improve personal effectiveness. One of the central features of NLP is its practical flexibility. Rather than offering a unified theory or empirical proof, NLP presents itself as a toolkit. It emphasises rapport-building, sensory awareness, and goal-oriented thinking. These techniques appeal to businesspeople, therapists, and public speakers seeking to sharpen their impact. In these settings, NLP may help improve interpersonal communication. It encourages careful observation of others' verbal and non-verbal cues and offers strategies for adjusting one's own behaviour accordingly. But NLP's promise is not without problems. Critics have repeatedly noted the lack of scientific support behind its claims. Meta-analyses and peer-reviewed studies have found little consistent evidence that NLP techniques reliably produce the outcomes they claim. At times, its terminology borrows loosely from psychology, linguistics, and neurology, but without satisfying academic standards from any of these fields. Bandler and Grinder themselves admitted that they were more interested in results than in rigorous theory, a stance that weakens the credibility of their methods. More concerning is how NLP has become associated with manipulation. Its tools, such as mirroring body language or mimicking speech rhythms, can be used to build unconscious trust. In the wrong hands, this creates opportunities for deceit. Salespeople, political operatives, and pickup artists have all been known to use these methods to manipulate emotions or decisions. While NLP may not be inherently unethical, its focus on persuasion makes it vulnerable to abuse. This is where NLP enters the territory of dark psychology. The idea that one can subtly influence, guide, or even control another person's thoughts plays into manipulative behaviour. Tactics such as reframing, anchoring emotions to words, or creating false rapport can be used with good intent—or not. Traits linked to manipulation, such as narcissism or Machiavellianism, often surface in discussions about how NLP has been misused. Though the system is not designed for harm, its openness to interpretation allows for a wide range of applications, ethical and otherwise. In the end, NLP remains a controversial topic. It promises power over language and perception but offers limited proof of its effectiveness. Its techniques may aid communication and self-awareness, but they can also be used to deceive and control. The dual nature of NLP—its appeal to both personal growth and psychological manipulation—demands a cautious and critical approach. Whether one sees NLP as a breakthrough or a modern myth, it offers a striking insight: people can try to rewire how they think and speak. With discipline and awareness, they can use language to influence emotion, shape decisions, and, potentially, change lives. In the book 'NLP: Your Map to Happiness, Confidence and Success (2012), by Neil Shah, language isn't just how people talk—it's how they magically rewire their brains. The words people use change how they feel and act so their language shapes their reality. As the Thomas Theorem states: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. Language becomes not just a reflection of thought, but a tool for transformation. NLP offers an ultimate technique for linguistic manipulation. It gives people a way to see their minds as systems that can be adjusted. With the right words, people can create new patterns are seen as happiness and success. NLP offers not just techniques, but the comforting illusion that changing a few words can change your life. Who needs therapy when you have syntax?

Direct manipulation

In 'Direct Manipulation: A Step Beyond Programming Languages[290]' Ben Shneiderman refers to the way users can interact with computers by handling objects on the screen, rather

[290] Shneiderman, "Direct Manipulation: A Step Beyond Programming Languages," in Computer, vol. 16, no. 8, pp. 57-69, Aug. 1983, doi: 10.1109/MC.1983.1654471.

than entering abstract commands. This design approach makes systems easier to understand and more satisfying to use. Users feel more in control when they see what they are doing and receive immediate responses. The process becomes less about remembering commands and more about engaging with tasks in real time. Ben Shneiderman highlights how direct manipulation systems use visible objects, quick feedback, and reversible actions. These elements reduce the need for typing commands and make learning faster. For example, instead of inputting lines of code to move text, a user can simply drag and drop it. Mistakes can be fixed easily, lowering anxiety and encouraging experimentation. The success of this design shows up in many areas. Display editors let people see and change a document as a whole page, making editing simpler than using older, line-by-line systems. Spreadsheets like Visicalc made calculations automatic. Instead of recalculating each time a value changed, the spreadsheet did it instantly. This saved time and opened new ways of managing data. Other examples include spatial data systems that use maps and charts to help users find patterns in complex datasets. In video games, players learn the controls by doing, not by reading long instructions. Designers and engineers use direct manipulation tools in CAD programs to adjust models in real time. Early office systems like the Xerox Star and Apple Lisa made it possible to move files with a mouse, setting the stage for today's graphical user interfaces. The psychological research behind this approach also matters. Studies show that people understand and remember visual information better than abstract commands. Physical actions, like dragging or clicking, reinforce understanding. This aligns with how people naturally solve problems—by interacting with the world. Still, this method has limits. Some tasks are too complex to represent visually. Too many graphics can also make an interface confusing. And while direct manipulation is great for beginners, expert users might find it slower than using typed commands. The key challenge is to design systems that are both easy to learn and powerful for those with more experience. Direct manipulation has changed how people use technology. It brings a sense of control and clarity to digital tasks. Although it may not fit every situation, its focus on visibility and feedback has become a standard in user interface design.

3. PHILOSOPHY

3.1. Philosophy of language

(From logic to life: The quest of language philosophy)

'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

'The meaning of a word is its use in the language'.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

The linguistic turn

The linguistic turn marked a decisive transformation in twentieth-century philosophy, effectively recasting all philosophical inquiry as an inquiry into language. What began as a methodological shift—centring on the analysis of linguistic meaning—gradually became a redefinition of philosophy’s very subject matter. From metaphysics and epistemology to ethics and aesthetics, every domain was reinterpreted through the lens of language, until, by the late

century, philosophy often appeared indistinguishable from linguistics, philology, or literary criticism. This turns gained prominence through the work of figures such as Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, who sought to clarify thought by clarifying language. Frege's sense-reference distinction introduced the idea that meaning had a logical structure distinct from empirical content. Russell's theory of descriptions attempted to resolve puzzles by showing how seemingly meaningful expressions referred to nothing at all. Early Wittgenstein took this further in the 'Tractatus', proposing that language 'pictures' reality through logical form—a vision of philosophy as the scaffolding that supports meaningful discourse. Yet even as analytic philosophers pursued precision through formal logic, the trajectory of the linguistic turn began to splinter. Later Wittgenstein rejected the earlier ideal of a purified logical language and instead claimed that meaning lies in use. Language was no longer a mirror of reality but a set of socially embedded habits. This shift gave rise to ordinary language philosophy, where philosophers like Austin and Strawson investigated how people perform actions—such as promising, commanding, or joking—by speaking. Language became not just a vehicle for conveying information but a tool for doing things in the world. Simultaneously, continental thinkers like Saussure emphasised the relational and differential structure of language. Meaning, on this account, does not stem from reference or intention but from systems of signs defined by their difference from others. Structuralism and poststructuralism deepened this view, culminating in Derrida's deconstruction, which argued that meaning is always deferred, never final—language devours itself in an endless play of signification. This expansion of the linguistic perspective also enveloped the philosophy of mind and cognition. Debates emerged over whether language shapes thought (as per the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) or simply reflects it. Cognitive science, drawing on these philosophical debates, examined how metaphor, naming, and categorisation influence perception and reasoning. The empirical study of language took centre stage, further displacing traditional metaphysical concerns. By the end of the twentieth century, philosophy had largely abandoned the search for eternal truths in favour of analysing how people speak, write, and mean. Philosophers became readers of texts, interpreters of discourses, and analysts of communicative patterns. The linguistic turn, once a strategy for achieving clarity, ended by redefining the philosopher as someone who writes about writing, speaks about speaking, and reads about reading. Philosophy, in turning entirely toward language, turned into the study of language itself—and, in doing so, surrendered its difference from linguistics, rhetoric, and philology. When philosophy lost its voice to philology, the thinker became a talker, and wisdom turned into words about words. At last, the philosopher became a professional reader.

Naming in philosophy

Saul Kripke's 'Naming and Necessity[291]' (1980), based on lectures delivered at Princeton in 1970, is a landmark in the philosophy of language and metaphysics, and a pivotal moment in the broader trajectory of the linguistic turn in philosophy. The linguistic turn, characterising much of twentieth-century analytic philosophy, emphasised that philosophical problems could often be resolved—or reformulated—by analysing language. In this context, Kripke's work fundamentally challenged long-standing descriptivist theories of reference, and in doing so, reshaped the philosophical understanding of how language connects to the world. Rejecting descriptivism, Kripke argued that proper names do not function like disguised descriptions (as Frege, Russell, and others claimed) but rather operate as rigid designators—terms that refer to the same object in every possible world in which that object exists. This insight allowed him to demonstrate that reference is not determined by a bundle of properties but by a historical chain

[291] Kripke, S. (1980) Naming and Necessity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

of communication. In this causal theory of reference, a name is linked to an object through an initial 'baptism' and is preserved through communal linguistic usage. This theory preserves reference even when the associated descriptions fail (e.g., Aristotle might not have taught Alexander the Great, but he is still 'Aristotle'). This shift away from description-based reference radically altered the terrain of the philosophy of language. Kripke's proposal of a posteriori necessities—statements that are both empirically discovered and necessarily true—undermined the long-standing assumption that all necessary truths are knowable a priori. Statements like 'Water is H_2O' or 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' are not just empirical discoveries; they are also metaphysically necessary, challenging Kantian divisions and suggesting a new relationship between semantics and metaphysics. Kripke's critique extended beyond language into the philosophy of mind. By analogising the identity claim 'heat is molecular motion' with 'pain is C-fibers firing', he raised doubts about the metaphysical necessity of such identities. His arguments anticipated future debates in consciousness studies, particularly concerning the explanatory gap between subjective experience and physical processes. These critiques reinforced the limitations of purely physicalist accounts of the mind, while remaining grounded in linguistic analysis. Though Kripke's position remains squarely analytic, 'Naming and Necessity' represents a return to metaphysical realism within the linguistic turn. It challenged the idea that language alone could exhaust the analysis of being, thereby reopening questions about essence, necessity, and identity that had been sidelined by earlier analytic approaches. By anchoring linguistic meaning in causal and modal structures rather than descriptive content, Kripke reoriented the linguistic turn toward ontological inquiry. While initially grounded in the debates of analytic philosophy, Kripke's work also intersects with themes explored in phenomenology, particularly the emphasis on direct reference, lived meaning, and the pre-conceptual grounding of language. Thus, 'Naming and Necessity' not only critiques previous linguistic models but also signals a broader philosophical shift: the recognition that language is not merely a mirror of thought, but a medium entangled with existence itself.

Language has eight letters

In 'The Philosophy of Language[292]', A. P. Martinich explores why language has always fascinated philosophers. Language is more than a tool—it is the defining trait of being human. Some primates may learn signals or gestures, but only human language offers infinite creative expression. That capacity is what separates symbolic noise from meaningful speech. Language matters because it solves problems—and sometimes causes them. Confusion often arises from how language is structured. Martinich points out that simple sentences like 'Nothing came down the road' might trick someone into believing that 'nothing' is a thing. Or when we say, 'Justice is a virtue', we risk treating abstract concepts like physical objects. Philosophy steps in to sort these illusions out. By analysing language, one avoids taking metaphor or grammar for reality. Many philosophers also ask whether language reflects the world. For Plato, language could mirror eternal truths. Wittgenstein's early work suggested that sentences 'picture' the world's structure, like a map mimics terrain. Later thinkers challenged this. Kant and others believed language did not reflect reality itself, but rather the structure of human thought about reality. Martinich divides the study of language into three main areas: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Syntax deals with structure. It focuses on how words are ordered to form correct sentences. Think of it as grammar without meaning. Semantics addresses meaning itself—what words refer to, and how we judge a sentence as true or false. Pragmatics examines language in use: how tone, intention, and context shape what we mean. Philosophers also make important

[292] Martinich, A.P. (1985) The Philosophy of Language. New York: Oxford University Press.

distinctions. There is a difference between 'using' a word (to refer to something) and 'mentioning' a word (to talk about the word itself). Saying 'Cicero was a senator' uses the word to name a person. Saying 'Cicero' has six letters' talks about the word itself. Another core idea is the distinction between object language and metalanguage. The object language is the one being studied. The metalanguage is the one used to talk about it. Without this distinction, philosophical inquiry becomes circular. Martinich also explains the difference between sentences, propositions, and statements. A sentence is just a string of words. A proposition is the meaning that a sentence expresses in a context. A statement is when a person asserts that proposition, committing to its truth. Formal systems like logic try to simplify and clarify language. They use limited vocabulary and fixed rules to avoid ambiguity. For example, in a made-up language like 'Languish', sentences follow strict patterns, and each part—names, predicates, and connectors—has a specific role. Semantics then assigns truth-values to those sentences based on rules. But formal systems only go so far. Real language is messy. It involves metaphor, emotion, suggestion. Martinich reminds us that language is not just a system of rules. It is a social act, a mental faculty, and a mirror of our deepest concerns about truth, reality, and meaning.

Referential theory of meaning

Words do more than make noise or fill space. They carry meaning, point to things, express thoughts. But what exactly gives a word its meaning? In 'Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction[293]', William G. Lycan explores this mystery, beginning with one of the oldest and most intuitive ideas: that words mean what they refer to. This is the Referential Theory of Meaning. It says that names point to people or objects, and general terms refer to categories—'dog' stands for the class of all dogs. Sentences combine these terms to represent states of affairs. 'The cat sat on the mat' is meaningful because it reflects a possible situation. At first glance, this seems right. People often act as if understanding a word means knowing what it stands for. But problems appear quickly. Some words clearly do not refer to anything. Take 'Pegasus'. There is no winged horse in the real world, yet people understand the sentence, 'Pegasus was a flying horse'. Or consider a sentence like 'I saw nobody'. The word 'nobody' does not refer to a thing, but it still contributes to the sentence's meaning. Then there are functional words—'and', 'if', 'not', 'the'. They do not point to objects. They structure relationships. Yet without them, sentences lose their coherence. Meaning, it turns out, is not just about reference. Structure also matters. A string of names—'Fred Martha Irving Phyllis'—says nothing. But arrange the names into a sentence with a verb—'Phyllis loves Irving'—and suddenly there is meaning. Grammar connects the pieces, turning scattered signs into a claim about the world. This structural element is invisible in the referential view. Even when two terms refer to the same thing, they are not always interchangeable. 'Joseph Ratzinger' and 'the Pope' may point to the same person, but they do not mean the same. Their connotations differ, and they fit differently in sentences. Meaning is more than reference; it includes how words are used, what they imply, and how they function in context. So, while reference plays a role in meaning, it cannot carry the full load. The classic objections—non-existent referents, negative existentials, informative identities, and failures of substitutivity—undermine the referential theory of meaning by showing that singular terms can be meaningful even when they fail to refer, refer redundantly, or behave asymmetrically in propositional contexts. Considering these challenges, the linguistic turn in philosophy did more than shift attention to language—it redefined meaning itself as something irreducible to reference, forcing philosophers to become analysts of

[293] Lycan, W.G. (2000) Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction (3rd edn., 2019). New York: Routledge.

linguistic form, textual context, and conceptual nuance rather than seekers of direct correspondence between word and world. Philosophers have proposed alternatives. Some turn to speaker intention, others to use and function, still others to mental representation or truth-conditions. Each theory tries to capture how humans move so fluidly from sounds to sense. Philosophy must first know itself before it seeks meaning in language, for language is the mirror that hides its own maker.

Knowledge of language

What does it mean to know a language? This question stands at the heart of Noam Chomsky's 'Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use[294]'. Language is not just a tool; it is part of the human mind. Knowing a language, Chomsky argues, is not just about speaking or writing. It is about having an internal system—an unconscious mental grammar—that shapes what one can say, understand, or even imagine saying. Many earlier thinkers saw language as a reflection of thought. Leibniz called it a mirror of the mind. Others believed grammar revealed universal truths. John Stuart Mill thought grammar was tied to logic. These ideas treated language not just as communication but as an insight into cognition. Over time, though, linguistics moved away from such views. With the rise of empiricism and behaviourism, language was studied as external behaviour—sounds, symbols, or rules shared by communities. Chomsky reoriented this approach. In the 1950s, he introduced 'generative grammar, shifting attention from language as shared behaviour to language as individual knowledge. For Chomsky, language is an internal system—what he calls I-language. This system is unique to each person and shaped by an innate faculty of the mind. One does not just learn language like one learns to ride a bike. Instead, humans are born with a universal framework, which gets tuned by experience. A core argument for this view is the 'poverty of the stimulus'. Children acquire rich and complex language, even when they receive limited and often flawed input. They pick up subtle rules—like the difference between 'John is too stubborn to talk to' and 'John is too stubborn to talk to someone'—without being taught. Such rapid, uniform learning suggests the presence of an internal, universal grammar guiding the process. Chomsky distinguishes between knowledge of language and ability to use it. A person may know a language but be unable to speak due to injury or fatigue. The knowledge remains intact. This shows that language competence is deeper than performance. It lives in the structure of the mind, not just in what people say or write. Importantly, this internal grammar is not always conscious. People know that 'John ate' implies that he ate something, not a shoe, but few could explain why. Such judgments reflect mental knowledge we carry without awareness. Chomsky's theory treats these intuitions as real data, just like observations in physics or biology. This view puts linguistics firmly within cognitive science. Language becomes not just an artefact but a biological phenomenon. Understanding it helps illuminate how the mind works—how humans learn, think, and generate meaning from sound.

From realism to quietism

What is the link between language and reality? Can words truly mirror the world, or are meanings always tied to what people know and do? In 'Philosophy of Language[295]', Alexander Miller explores how these questions shape debates between realism and anti-realism. Realism begins with a simple idea: language aims to describe a world that exists independently of thought. A sentence like 'There are three chairs in the room' is true if, and only if, the room really contains three chairs. This applies not only to physical facts but also to moral ones. A

[294] Chomsky, N. (1986) Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use. New York: Praeger.
[295] Miller, A. (2007) Philosophy of Language. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

realist holds that 'Murder is wrong' expresses a truth, regardless of belief or emotion. Opponents of realism offer various challenges. Non-cognitivists, like A.J. Ayer, claim that moral statements do not describe facts but express attitudes. 'Stealing is wrong', in this view, is more like saying 'Boo to stealing!' The problem arises when such statements are used in reasoning. The Frege–Geach problem shows that logical arguments require these phrases to retain consistent meaning. If they do not, moral reasoning disintegrates. Another critique comes from Michael Dummett. He argues that realism commits us to verification-transcendent truths—truths that exist even if we can never know or prove them. This idea is puzzling. How can someone understand a statement if its truth lies forever beyond their reach? Anti-realists respond with several arguments. The acquisition challenge asks how speakers could ever learn such inaccessible truths. The manifestation argument, influenced by Wittgenstein, says understanding is shown in use—not in grasping the unknowable. The rule-following problem questions whether meaning can ever be fixed beyond judgment. If meaning depends on interpretation, then so does truth. Hilary Putnam's Twin-Earth thought experiment adds another layer. Imagine two worlds: on Earth, 'water' refers to H_2O; on Twin-Earth, it refers to XYZ, a similar but different substance. Even if people think and speak identically, their words refer to different things. This supports semantic externalism—the view that meaning depends on the environment, not just mental content. Crispin Wright expands these ideas by outlining different 'marks of realism'. Some domains, like science, might meet all of them. Others, like comedy or morality, might only meet a few. This suggests that realism is not a yes-or-no position but a scale. Quietism, however, rejects the whole debate. Drawing again on Wittgenstein, quietists argue that the search for metaphysical truth in language may be misguided. But not all philosophers agree. John McDowell defends a view of meaning that connects language with the world without abandoning its normative power. In the end, the philosophy of language reveals more than grammar or syntax. It shows how deeply truth, meaning, and understanding are entangled. Whether truth lies beyond verification or not, these debates illuminate the fragile link between words and the world.

How does it mean to say something?

Philosophy of language begins with a simple question that leads to many complex ones: what does it mean to say something? In 'The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language[296]', Steven M. Cahn and contributors explore how even this question is far from settled. The field is filled with debates—about meaning, reference, truth, and interpretation—that have divided philosophers for decades. A central issue is the nature of meaning. Words and sentences clearly carry meaning, but what is that meaning? Is it just what they refer to in the world? That is one idea, but it quickly runs into problems. A single sentence can mean different things depending on context. Think of irony, suggestion, or ambiguity. This leads philosophers to distinguish between semantics (literal meaning) and pragmatics (contextual or implied meaning). But the border between the two is not clear. Another foundational issue is methodology. Should philosophy of language be purely conceptual and analytic, or should it be part of science? Some philosophers argue for a purely a priori approach, relying on logical reasoning and intuitions. Others think meanings should be studied empirically, using tools from psychology and cognitive science. Neither side has fully won this argument. In practice, many philosophers now move between the two. Intuition also plays a key role. Philosophers often test their theories using thought experiments, asking what people would say or believe in unusual situations. Are these reliable sources of insight or just reflections of cultural bias? Again, opinions differ. Some

[296] Cahn, S.M. (ed.) (2003) The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language. Oxford: Blackwell.

see intuitions as evidence, others see them as suspect. The relationship between language and thought is another deep puzzle. Do we think first and then put thoughts into words? Or does language shape the way we think? Some, like Paul Grice, say thought comes first. Others, like Michael Dummett, argue that language is prior, or at least co-equal. If language is necessary for thought, then our ability to think might depend on the language we speak. Then there is the question of what it means to 'know' a language. Most people can use their language without being able to explain its rules. So, what kind of knowledge is that? Philosophers call it tacit knowledge—an understanding we have but cannot always describe. Some argue it is a skill, like riding a bike. Others say it is more like knowing a fact, even if we cannot articulate it. Competing theories try to explain how language works. The Gricean approach says meaning comes from the speaker's intentions. Davidsonians focus on truth conditions—what would have to be true for a sentence to be correct. These views compete with use-based theories, which say meaning comes from how words are used in conversation. Finally, major challenges like vagueness and meaning scepticism still haunt the field. How many grains of sand make a heap? When does red become orange? Questions like these show how difficult it is to define meaning precisely. Some philosophers even wonder whether words have fixed meanings at all. The philosophy of language is not a settled discipline. It is a site of ongoing struggle—between logic and usage, intuition and science, simplicity, and ambiguity. It asks what words are, what they do, and how they shape the human experience. How does it mean to say something?

3.2. Theory of language

(The architecture of meaning: Language as structure, life, and sign)

'Language is form, not substance'.

— Louis Hjelmslev, Prolegomena to a Theory of Language

'A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas'.

— Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics

Final perspective of language

Linguistic theory began as a narrow, technical approach. It focused on describing small samples of natural language. But this limited view could not last. Step by step, and with inner necessity, it gave way to something broader. What started as a method for analysing grammar became a gateway to understanding the totality of human expression. Each speech act demands integration. It cannot be viewed in isolation. Even the smallest utterance leads outward, pointing to other systems and usages. A dialect or a writing style is not closed; it exists in a web of connections. These links—social, historical, stylistic—must be considered. As analysis expands, so does the scope of the theory. What once seemed like isolated phenomena turn out to be parts of a larger, interrelated field. No single language can be studied on its own. Each belongs to a class, a family. These linguistic types reflect and define one another. A language is what it is because of how it differs from others. Functional identity is relational. Theory must include this interplay. It maps a system of languages, structured by internal types and shaped by historical contact, genetic lineage, and borrowing. Further reflection pushes theory beyond language into semiotics. What was once excluded—gesture, symbols, other sign systems—

must now be included. Semiotics absorbs non-semiotics. Everything becomes readable. Nothing stands fully outside of signification. Linguistic theory grows into a universal interpretive tool. It shines light on all domains of knowledge. This shift did not betray the early goals of theory. On the contrary, it fulfilled them. By focusing on immanence—on form, system, and internal relation—the theory discovered something more powerful. It revealed language as the basis for transcendence. The narrow view opened to a wider horizon. Through structure, one reaches significance. Language, in this light, is more than a tool. It is the medium of thought, the trace of culture, and the mirror of being. Theory, at its most abstract, touches on life itself. It no longer deals only with texts but with the human condition. Linguistic structure becomes the starting point for philosophy, art, and science. In this expanded form, theory meets its final purpose. It recognises not just grammar, but the speaker. Not just the system, but the community. It accounts for use, variation, context, and meaning. In doing so, it approaches a total understanding. A silent understanding between neighbours, between people living together. The language ends where it started.

Prolegomena to a theory

Louis Hjelmslev begins 'Prolegomena to a Theory of Language[297]' with a striking claim: language is not simply a means of communication, but the central structure that holds human life together. It mediates thought, emotion, memory, and action. Before consciousness itself, language is already present—surrounding the newborn, shaping its first perceptions. It offers companionship in solitude, and forms the invisible thread linking individuals to communities, cultures, and history. More than a tool, language becomes an inner monologue, a conscience, and even a source of identity. Hjelmslev asks whether language reflects life, or if it is the very seed from which life grows. The scientific study of language, however, has often neglected its autonomy. Language is usually reduced to its physical or psychological correlates—sound waves, gestures, brain states. Linguistics becomes a servant to other sciences, a way to understand thought, culture, or history. Hjelmslev's call is different: language must be studied. It is not just a function of the body or mind, but a self-contained structure with its own principles. A theory of language must begin by treating language as autonomous—free from reduction, yet fully capable of revealing insights about the human condition. To build such a theory, one must identify the constancy beneath the fluctuations of speech. This is not to deny variation, but to look for structure within it. The theory must describe language in a way that holds across all its forms—spoken, written, signed, or coded. It must also remain valid for all conceivable languages, not just those currently spoken. The aim is a method, simple yet complete, for describing any linguistic expression. For this, the theory cannot rely on historical accidents, individual psychology, or sociological trends. It must be deductive, systematic, and general. Such a theory faces resistance from the humanities, where uniqueness and particularity often overshadow structure and regularity. But Hjelmslev insists that a system lies beneath the surface. Even art, literature, and style can be analysed through linguistic functions, forms, and rules. What is needed is not to flatten difference, but to understand the systems that give rise to difference in the first place. This theoretical model does not ignore reality. It is not mere abstraction. Rather, it begins with empirical observations—texts, utterances, signs—but seeks to explain them through formal structure. The theory is arbitrary in its principles, but valid in its application. It does not describe experience directly but creates a framework within which experience can be described. This is its strength: it brings order to diversity. Hjelmslev's vision extends beyond language narrowly defined. By separating form from substance, he shows that

[297] Hjelmslev, L. (1961) Prolegomena to a Theory of Language. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

the same linguistic structure can manifest in sound, writing, gesture, or symbols. Even non-verbal systems—flag codes, sign languages, formal logic—may follow linguistic rules. In this way, his theory becomes a general semiotics. Connotative and metasemiotic layers allow it to analyze not only what is said, but how meaning systems reference one another. A text, for example, can contain many semiotic layers, each embedded in others. Ultimately, this vision leads toward universality. Every language, dialect, and code become a case within a larger system. Languages do not stand alone. They are interconnected through borrowings, structures, and relations. No speech act is isolated; every utterance is a node in a web of form and function. Language theory, by following its internal logic, eventually returns to the human. From its strict immanence arises a new foundation for transcendence. It does not oppose life—it clarifies it. Language is no longer merely a mirror. It becomes a method of inquiry into the world itself, offering not only expression but understanding. The goal is not simply to describe language, but to recognise in it how all understanding begins.

Language and non-language

In traditional linguistics, the focus remains tightly fixed on 'natural' language. Speech and writing are treated as the primary forms of linguistic expression. But this perspective is too narrow. According to Louis Hjelmslev, linguistic theory must eventually move beyond this initial boundary. The shift is not optional—it is demanded by the internal logic of the theory itself. Once language is understood not as a set of sounds but as a form independent of substance, the theory expands toward other sign systems. This expansion was implicit from the beginning. As soon as one treats form and content as separate, it becomes clear that linguistic form can manifest in many kinds of substance. Language is not just sound and gesture. It can also take the form of writing, flags, or hand signs. These are not secondary or artificial modes. They express the same linguistic form as speech and must be included in any complete theory. This undermines the idea that sound is the 'natural' mode of language. Linguistic theory reveals that substance—sound, gesture, writing—is arbitrary. What matters is the form behind the substance. Two common objections arise. First, that non-speech forms are derived from speech and therefore less fundamental. But even if they are derived, they express the same structure. In some cases, like alphabetic writing, the form may be even more precise. Second, that changing the substance alters the form. But this is only true when substance and form are confused. A phonetic change or a semantic shift might alter meaning, but the underlying linguistic system can stay intact. Form is stable. Substance is variable. In this view, form is an abstract algebraic structure. It has no inherent substance. It can be expressed in multiple ways. The task of linguistic theory is to describe this structure—to build a general calculus of language. This framework should be able to account for any linguistic type, regardless of how it is manifested. The goal is not to describe a particular language, but to define a theory that can apply to all languages, even those not yet known. This leads naturally to a broader semiotic field. Denotative semiotics deal with signs whose expression and content are not themselves semiotic systems. But often, one or both planes are semiotic. If the expression is a semiotic, we call it connotative. If the content is, we call it metasemiotic. This layered structure shows that texts are rarely simple. They often include components from multiple systems—linguistic, social, political. Recognising this complexity is essential to understanding how meaning is constructed. The theory still holds to its core principles—form, function, and structure—but now it engages with new domains. Linguistics becomes semiotics. The study of language becomes the study of sign systems more generally. What began as a narrow analysis of speech becomes a method for understanding all forms of communication.

Semiotic theory of language

Sebastian Shaumyan's 'A Semiotic Theory of Language[298]' shifts the focus of linguistics away from purely structural or generative models. He argues that language must be understood as a system of signs—deeply tied to human consciousness, society, and cognition. This means language is not only about sound and grammar, but about meaning shaped by culture and interaction. It is a human creation, yet once created, it functions independently, forming what Shaumyan calls a semiotic world. Unlike generative linguistics, which builds language from abstract rules and transformations, semiotic theory starts from function. Language is used to communicate, so any analysis must ask: what signs are people using, and what meanings do those signs carry? That is the real basis of language. Phonemes and words do not just exist—they do something. They act as signs in a complex code that people learn through culture and use. Shaumyan identifies key features that define natural language. First, language works through sequencing: people combine limited phonemes to create vast vocabularies. But these combinations are not random. Grammar introduces rules that reduce errors and enhance clarity. Structure also matters. Language works on levels—sounds, morphemes, sentences—all layered in a hierarchy. This layered structure helps explain how people can produce and understand endlessly varied expressions. Another central idea is semiotic relevance. Only distinctions that matter for communication—differences that carry meaning—are linguistically relevant. This helps explain why different languages carve up reality in different ways. For example, some have dozens of words for snow, others just one. These differences reflect what each culture finds important, not arbitrary variation. This is the heart of linguistic relativity—language shapes how people see the world. Shaumyan also stresses that linguistics is just one branch of semiotics. Human languages are 'very large systems', capable of infinite expression. This sets them apart from artificial sign systems like logic or programming languages. Still, natural languages share a linguistic genotype—an underlying structure present in all human tongues. Studying this helps identify universal features of language. Unlike formal theories that treat language like a machine, semiotic theory is more flexible. It focuses on synchronic analysis (how language works now) but still values diachronic study (how language changes). Both are necessary. Languages evolve, but they must function at any given moment for communication to succeed. Shaumyan critiques generative grammar for ignoring the semiotic nature of language. Rules alone do not capture what language means or how it is used. Generativist models, he argues, confuse logical possibility with human practice. They build deep structures and transformations that may be elegant but do not reflect how people speak or think. In contrast, semiotic theory centres language in human life. It sees it as a living, changing system of meaning. This approach does not reduce speech to formulas. Instead, it respects the full complexity of how people create, learn, and use signs to understand one another.

Translation and interpretation

Translation and interpretation sit at the heart of philosophical reflection on language, meaning, and understanding. These processes are not merely about converting words from one language to another—they raise deep questions about the limits of meaning, the nature of communication, and whether language can ever fully capture thought. In his 1960 book 'Word and Object', W\.V. Quine challenged assumptions about translation by proposing the idea of radical translation. He asked: what would it take to translate an entirely unknown language, from scratch, using only observation of speakers' behaviour and the physical context in which they speak? Quine imagines a linguist encountering an unfamiliar language and hearing the

[298] Shaumyan, S. (1987) A Semiotic Theory of Language. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

word 'gavagai' shouted when a rabbit scurries past. Does this word refer to the whole rabbit, a rabbit part like its tail, or even a fleeting temporal stage of 'rabbitness'? Without knowing the internal conceptual structure of the speaker's mind, the translator can only guess. Multiple translation manuals could explain the observed behaviour equally well yet contradict each other about what the word really means. Quine concluded that reference is fundamentally indeterminate, and thus there is no objective fact about what a given word 'really' refers to. This became the foundation for his thesis of the indeterminacy of translation and launched a new phase of semantic scepticism. Building on this idea, Donald Davidson introduced the concept of radical interpretation[299]. Unlike Quine's encounter with an alien language, Davidson explored how one interprets the speech and actions of others within the same linguistic community. His insight was that understanding even a familiar language involves attributing meaning not just to words or sentences in isolation, but to a whole network of beliefs, desires, and attitudes. Interpretation, for Davidson, depends on identifying patterns of coherence among a speaker's statements, as well as between those statements and the surrounding world. Understanding, then, is not a matter of decoding fixed meanings, but of constructing a framework where the speaker's utterances and worldview make sense together. These theories share a commitment to semantic holism, the idea that meaning depends on the whole system of language and thought rather than isolated terms. One cannot interpret a single sentence without reference to a broader context of usage, intention, and belief. This has implications for everything from translation software to political rhetoric: meaning is never neutral, and understanding is always partial and interpretative. Another major philosophical issue related to interpretation is vagueness. Words like 'tall', or 'heap' resist strict boundaries. The Sorites paradox famously illustrates how the gradual removal of grains from a heap seems never to eliminate the 'heap', yet clearly a single grain is not one. Classical logic struggles with these grey areas. To address this, philosophers and logicians have proposed alternative systems—such as fuzzy logic or three-valued logics—that allow for intermediate truth values. These systems mirror the ambiguity found in natural language more accurately than binary logic. Together, the problems of translation, interpretation, and vagueness show that language is not a mirror of reality but a tool for navigating it—imprecise, flexible, and deeply embedded in human experience.

Mind, reason and imagination

Understanding language depends not only on knowing the words but also on interpreting how people use them. The act of translation—whether between languages, cultures, or even between minds—raises profound questions about meaning, context, and the human capacity to share thoughts. In 'Mind, Reason, and Imagination[300]', a collection of essays from the Cambridge Studies in Philosophy series, these questions are approached not just through formal logic, but by exploring the imaginative and rational capacities that make communication possible. Traditional philosophy of language has often treated psychological concepts as if they functioned like the concepts of natural science—predictable, objective, and easily codified. But this view overlooks the subtle, dialogical nature of how humans engage with one another. People are not merely systems to be decoded. They are interlocutors—agents whose mental

[299] Davidson, D. (1973). Radical Interpretation. Dialectica, 27(3/4), 313–328. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42968535

[300] Heal, J. (2003). Mind, reason, and imagination : selected essays in philosophy of mind and language. Cambridge: University Press.

states we infer, not calculate. The challenge of interpretation lies in this relational complexity. One of the core questions explored is: how do humans arrive at judgments about what others think? Some cognitive theories, like the so-called 'Theory Theory (TT)', claim that people use a kind of internalised folk psychology—a mini-scientific theory—to predict behaviour. But this model assumes a level of computational sophistication that real-life thinking rarely demonstrates. Instead, a more human approach emerges from what is called simulation theory: we understand others by imaginatively putting ourselves in their shoes, projecting our own rationality into theirs. This is less a science than a habit, shaped by empathy, shared norms, and lived experience. Interpretation also requires attention to context and indexicality—those aspects of language that refer not to stable definitions but to changing conditions. When someone says, 'I feel this way', or points while saying, 'like this', the meaning relies on shared presence and perspective. Such expressions depend on indexical predication, a term explored in the book to describe how we refer not to fixed entities but to properties demonstrated in context. This has direct implications for translation, especially across cultural or linguistic divides, where such gestures and tacit understandings cannot be easily transferred. Indirect discourse further complicates things. When one reports another's speech—'She said that the Earth moves'—there is no one-to-one mapping from original utterance to report. The sentence must shift grammatical and temporal cues, adjusting to new contexts and speakers. Here again, interpretation hinges not just on lexical accuracy but on shared imagination and rational inference. The essays suggest that understanding others is not a matter of discovering psychological facts but recognising persons as rational beings. This view reintroduces a humanistic dimension into philosophy of language, resisting the temptation to reduce people to data points or behaviour patterns. Language, on this view, is not only a tool for conveying information but also for creating shared meaning. It works not just through reference but through imagination, empathy, and dialogue.

Language and reality

Language shapes how people perceive the world. It connects thought to action, private experience to public exchange. In their book 'Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language[301]', Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny explore how language functions, what meaning is, and how closely language aligns with the physical world. Their approach challenges the belief that language holds a privileged place in philosophy. While acknowledging its importance, they argue for a naturalistic and empirical view of linguistic theory. Language is not simply a reflection of the world. It is also a tool. People use it to inform, command, joke, insult, or express inner thoughts. But what allows language to be so flexible? Human language differs from animal signalling because it is abstract, arbitrary, and productive. It is not bound by immediate stimuli. It operates across media—spoken, written, or signed. Its strength lies in its ability to generate endless combinations from finite elements. These features make language powerful but also difficult to define. The main question, then, is: what gives words their meaning? Philosophers once believed language could solve deep metaphysical puzzles. Some even thought that by analysing meaning, one could answer ethical or epistemological problems. Devitt and Sterelny push back. They argue that meaning should not be treated as a mystical or purely philosophical concept. Instead, linguistic meaning, like all natural phenomena, should be explained using physicalist and empirical methods. Philosophy of language, according to the authors, must not drift into speculation detached from science. Instead, it must align with theories in biology, psychology, and neuroscience. Language

[301] Devitt, M. and Sterelny, K. (1999) Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

evolved. Its use depends on the cognitive structures of the human brain. Understanding language means understanding these structures and their functions. The authors make an important distinction between the problem of meaning and the problem of understanding. One concerns how symbols refer to things. The other deals with what it means to be competent in a language. These are separate questions, even if they are related. Linguistic theories must address both: what signs mean, and how people come to grasp them. The book also criticises certain philosophical tendencies, such as the reliance on the 'principle of charity'. Some thinkers, like Davidson or Dennett, argue that when interpreting speech, we must assume most beliefs are true or rational. Devitt and Sterelny reject this. They believe it adds unnecessary metaphysical weight. In science, false beliefs are normal. Understanding a system means accounting for both truth and error. Language is not outside the natural world. It is part of it. Devitt and Sterelny argue for a view where linguistic facts—about meaning, reference, truth—must be explained in natural terms. If those explanations fail, the concepts should be dropped from theory. Philosophy, they argue, must not elevate language above the physical world. Instead, it must show how language fits into it.

The home of language

Martin Heidegger saw language not merely as a tool but as the ground of human existence. In 'Being and Time', and more explicitly in his later writings, Heidegger reoriented philosophical attention away from the instrumental view of speech and toward what he called 'saying' — the revealing of Being through language. Joseph Kockelmans, in 'On Heidegger and Language[302]', explores this transformation, stressing that for Heidegger, humans do not simply speak language — they belong to it. Humans do not invent language to communicate pre-existing ideas; rather, it is the space in which beings appear and meaning emerges. In contrast to classical views—where language functions to represent inner thoughts or external objects—Heidegger's perspective insists that language is the very event through which world and meaning come into view. Language, in its deepest sense, is not speech, writing, or symbolic systems. It is logos, the originary gathering and revealing that lets beings be seen. This insight challenges centuries of metaphysical assumptions, from Aristotle's notion of speech as signification to modern structuralism's fixation on language as code. For Heidegger, the problem lies in the forgetfulness of Being that occurs when language is reduced to utility. In everyday speech, humans often repeat phrases, clichés, and inherited concepts without listening to what language itself says. Kockelmans draws attention to this point, showing how Heidegger redefines 'saying' as the primordial act that lets things appear. Language is a kind of clearing—Lichtung—a space where the world discloses itself. In this clearing, humans do not impose meaning, but receive it, respond to it, and let it resonate. This understanding demands a different kind of listening. Speaking is grounded in hearing—an openness to what language allows to show itself. Heidegger describes this as listening not to what is said, but to the saying of it. Authentic speech, then, is not chatter but an attuned responsiveness to the world's disclosure. When one speaks authentically, one does not manipulate language but lets language speak. This distinction between 'speaking' and 'saying' is crucial. One can speak endlessly without saying anything. True saying brings forth meaning by pointing, revealing, and letting-be. Heidegger's critique of modern language use is not nostalgic. He does not call for a return to myth or poetry alone, though he finds in poets like Hölderlin a model of language that listens deeply. Rather, he aims to recover a pre-conceptual relationship to Being, a kind of original thinking that precedes representation and calculation. Language, in this view, is not about grasping or

[302] Kockelmans, J.J. (1980) On Heidegger and Language, Northwestern University Press.

mastering the world but dwelling in it. Kockelmans shows that for Heidegger, the essence of language lies in its granting—its capacity to bring forth beings into presence without enclosing them in rigid concepts. Language is not a mirror but a horizon. It does not produce the world but lets it emerge. To speak, then, is to dwell—to participate in the ongoing revelation of Being through language that speaks through us. Language is not a system humans use, but a home they inhabit. It speaks to us, even as we try to speak it.

Language of modernity

In 'Voices of Modernity[303]', Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs uncover how ideas about language helped construct the very concept of modernity. They argue that language was not simply shaped by modern institutions—it helped build them. From philosophy to science, from colonial governance to educational reform, linguistic ideologies became tools for structuring who could speak, who should listen, and whose voices were dismissed as irrational, emotional, or primitive. The book begins with the Enlightenment, when figures like John Locke redefined language as a transparent medium of reason. For Locke, speech was valuable only if it could convey clear, rational ideas. He championed linguistic clarity, treating precision as a marker of truth and modern thinking. But this ideal was far from neutral. It excluded those who did not—or could not—speak in this purified manner. The poor, women, colonised people, and oral communities were judged as lacking modern consciousness because of the way they spoke. The ideology of linguistic purity justified systems of social exclusion. Language became a gatekeeper. If someone's speech did not conform to the standards of clarity, order, and reason, their ideas were dismissed. These norms were not just about grammar or pronunciation. They were about authority and trust. Who gets to define knowledge? Who gets to represent the world? Print culture reinforced this. The shift from orality to literacy was not just technical; it was political. Writing, especially printed writing, was linked to truth, objectivity, and permanence. Oral traditions, in contrast, were seen as unstable, emotional, and prone to error. This distinction helped reinforce social hierarchies between those aligned with written culture and those tied to spoken traditions. Modernity did not erase local, embodied, and affective forms of communication. It repressed and reclassified them. Language was divided and ranked. Standardised languages were seen as legitimate; dialects were seen as backward. Vernacular speech became a marker of moral, cultural, and racial difference. This sorting mechanism was central to colonial administration, national education, and even scientific discourse. But modernity's own practices of speech were not as pure as they claimed. The language of reason, science, and law was also shaped by rhetoric, performance, and power. Enlightenment thinkers pretended to purify language of its messy, contextual roots. In doing so, they created a paradox. They promoted speech as universal but built it on exclusion. They declared language transparent, while using it to obscure the systems of inequality it helped produce. This contradiction still shapes the present. From media discourse to academic writing, dominant voices often speak in the idiom of neutrality and reason, while silencing alternative ways of knowing. Modernity's emphasis on clarity, rationality, and standardised speech reveals language not as a neutral medium, but as a structured system of exclusion—privileging certain voices while silencing others. This tendency supports a theory of language as inherently hierarchical, where absolute freedom of speech becomes paradoxical. Unrestricted expression could undermine the very coherence of a linguistic community, eroding the shared norms that

[303] Bauman, R. and Briggs, C.L. (2003). Voices of modernity : language ideologies and the politics of inequality. Cambridge, England ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

make communication, mutual recognition, and social meaning possible. When every tongue speaks without limit, the voice of the community is the first to fall silent.

Illusion of universality

Locke's redefinition of language was more than a philosophical exercise. It was a foundational act in shaping modernity's illusion of neutrality and universality. In the chapter 'Language, Modernity, and the Illusion of Universality', Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs trace how language was purified—detached from its social contexts and repackaged as abstract, rational, and universal. This purification project obscured the cultural biases embedded in modernist thought and helped normalise new forms of exclusion. What Locke did was to turn language into a measuring tool. Precision in speech became a sign of education, order, and legitimacy. The result was a split: expressive or poetic uses of language were marked as irrational, backward, or folkloric, while standard, rational speech became the mark of a modern subject. Locke's purified language stripped away context, metaphor, and ambiguity—traits often associated with women, colonised peoples, or the poor. Language was now a gatekeeper, not just a tool. This is where hybridisation entered. Even as Locke and others promoted purified speech, the very process of universalising it created new mixtures. Herder, for example, gave value to folk speech and tradition, yet framed them as artefacts of the past—worthy of study, but not of participation in modern governance. This contradiction remains. Modernity both praises and marginalises the folk. It celebrates 'cultural diversity' while imposing a strict standard of what counts as valid language. Hybrid traditions become museum pieces, not living practices. Language, then, becomes both weapon and decoration. In education, policy, and media, purified language still holds sway. It appears to be universal, but this is illusion—an illusion created through centuries of ideological labour. Bauman and Briggs show how purification is always paired with a logic of exclusion. Those who do not speak 'correctly' are framed as irrational or politically suspect. The debates around Ebonics in 1990s America show this clearly. When African American English was recognised as a distinct linguistic system, it provoked backlash—not because it was not valid, but because it disrupted the fiction of a single, neutral standard. Critics feared disorder, even though the real threat was to a system that masks inequality as common sense. This legacy continues in the global stage. International agencies like UNESCO celebrate traditional speech while also regulating it, often turning it into a static object. The idea of safeguarding culture sounds inclusive, but it depends on the same purified frame that shaped early modern ideologies. 'Tradition' is frozen and rebranded. It is allowed to survive only under expert supervision. This is not preservation—it is containment. To move beyond this, Bauman and Briggs argue for a reflexive approach. Language is never neutral. It is never outside of politics. The point is not to return to pure or authentic forms but to uncover the processes that make language seem pure in the first place. Understanding purification and hybridisation as coexisting strategies allows for more honest critique. The goal is not to reject modernity wholesale, but to recognise the power dynamics embedded in its linguistic foundations. This means treating tradition not as a relic, but as a living and contested space—one that can still resist dominant narratives. If purified language remains the hidden standard, inequality will continue to wear the mask of clarity and reason.

3.3. Meaning of language

(The fragility of meaning: Language between mind and world)

'Words are like leaves; and where they most abound, much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found'.

— Alexander Pope, An Essay on Criticism

'Meaning is not something behind the utterance; it is the use to which the utterance is put'.

— J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words

Questions that refuse to go away

In 'What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy[304]', Thomas Nagel sets aside the technical debates and historical footnotes often found in philosophy texts and goes straight to the root of human curiosity: Why are we here? How can we know anything? What can we hope for if anything at all? His slim volume is not a roadmap to final answers, but an invitation to sit with uncertainty, to think seriously about questions that children ask and adults tend to ignore. Nagel does not treat philosophy as a discipline with settled foundations, but as a way of living with and reflecting on persistent doubt. He opens by asking how one can be sure of the world beyond personal experience. The familiar table, the floor under one's feet—how do we know they exist independently of our senses? Scepticism is not solved here, only made vivid. One might dismiss it as mere abstraction, yet it remains troubling: what if one's grasp of reality is always filtered, always partial? The same style of careful questioning recurs when Nagel turns to other people. How can you be sure that others have inner lives like your own? Expressions, words, gestures—these are clues, but none are guarantees. It is not just a problem of information; it is a problem of being human in relation to other humans. If your inner world is incommunicable in its entirety, what makes you trust anyone else has one at all? This leads into the mind-body problem. Is the mind just another physical phenomenon—neurons firing—or something fundamentally different? Nagel lays out both materialist and dualist positions but lets the problem remain open. His reluctance to settle reflects a deeper commitment to living with contradiction and complexity. The issue of meaning in language gets similar treatment. Words connect to ideas, but how? Is there a stable bridge between language and thought, or is it all a construct that we have collectively agreed to pretend works? Free will is another such knot: people feel free, yet their actions seem determined by biology, history, and cause-and-effect. Is moral responsibility possible under such constraints? Morality, too, is on unstable ground. Nagel questions whether right and wrong are objective features of the world or products of culture and emotion. Justice comes next—what does fairness mean when resources, ability, and opportunity are so unevenly distributed? Can one defend equality without ignoring difference? Death and the meaning of life round out the inquiry. Rather than comfort the reader, Nagel highlights the absurdity of life's brevity and the strange fact of consciousness in the face of eventual extinction. But instead of despair, he encourages thoughtful reflection. What gives the book its strength is not the answers but the integrity of the questions. Nagel shows that philosophy does not need to resolve the human condition to make it more intelligible. It is enough to sit with the unresolvable and ask, again and again, what does it all mean?

[304] Nagel, T. (1987). What Does It All Mean? Oxford University Press.

Morality as evolutionary illusion

In 'The Myth of Morality[305]', Richard Joyce argues that moral thinking is not what it seems. People treat moral rules as objective truths—unbreakable, universal, and real. But according to Joyce, this certainty is an illusion. Morality did not come from logic or divine command. It evolved. It helped humans survive. And like many evolutionary tools, it does not need to be true to be useful. Morality likely began in families. Evolution favoured helping close kin, because helping relatives helps genes spread. You do not need a reason to feed your child—you just do it. But instinct alone was not enough. Desires can fail under stress. So, evolution added pressure. It created a sense of duty. A built-in 'ought'. This internal push made sure people helped even when it was hard. Over time, this system expanded. Morality moved beyond blood. Reciprocal altruism—helping non-relatives in return for future help—became a winning strategy. Tribes that cooperated more outperformed those that did not. But cooperation needed rules. Trust mattered. Groups began to punish cheaters and praise the fair. A sense of justice took root. Even some primates show this—chimpanzees respond to fairness and punishment. These emotions formed the foundation of what later became moral systems. One feature of morality stands out: its categorical tone. Moral statements do not say, 'If you feel like it, be kind'. They say, 'You must be kind'. This forceful framing helps override selfish impulses. It keeps people on course, even when it is inconvenient. If morality sounded optional, it would not work. But if morality evolved this way, its authority becomes suspicious. Natural selection does not aim for truth. It aims for fitness. So, if a false belief improves survival, evolution will favour it. From this view, moral beliefs are like helpful hallucinations. They get results, not because they are right, but because they shape behaviour. Critics might say this is the genetic fallacy—judging a belief's truth by its origin. But Joyce replies that if the belief system was shaped by processes blind to truth, its claims to truth are weakened. For example, disgust toward incest evolved to avoid genetic defects. But the belief that incest is 'immoral' may just be evolution's way of reinforcing a safety rule, not reflecting some eternal law. Joyce does not suggest we abandon morality completely. That would cause chaos. Instead, he explores moral fictionalism—the idea that people can use moral language and act morally, even if they do not believe in objective moral facts. Like pretending in a game, people can treat moral rules as if they are real to guide their behaviour. This view is uncomfortable. It says morality is made-up, yet necessary. But it fits with how people live: needing structure, craving meaning, but aware that much of what feels solid is built on inherited instincts. Joyce's theory challenges the deep trust people place in moral claims. If he is right, morality is not truth—but it works.

Morality as practice

In 'The Myth of Morality', Richard Joyce reaches a restrained but important conclusion. He does not claim that moral fictionalism—the idea of treating moral statements as useful fictions—is a perfect answer. Instead, he presents it as a reasonable option in a time of uncertainty. Moral beliefs, even if not true, might still help people make decisions, build communities, and resist impulsive behaviour. The value of morality may not lie in truth but in effect. People use it to shape behaviour, especially when rational calculation fails. For example, moral habits can protect against short-term temptations. When someone frames an action as 'right' rather than merely 'helpful', they are more likely to follow through. This helps in situations where long-term benefit depends on resisting momentary desires. Shared moral language allows people to condemn actions like cruelty or betrayal in a unified way. These

[305] Joyce, R. (2001). The Myth of Morality. Cambridge University Press.

public responses—rituals of disapproval or solidarity—reinforce bonds. Even if the underlying beliefs are false, the shared judgment strengthens the social fabric. Importantly, this view does not argue for preserving morality in its original, unquestioned form. It acknowledges that belief in moral facts conflicts with science, reason, and a modern understanding of the world. Yet it warns against discarding morality entirely, as doing so could lead to disorientation and a sense of rootlessness. Fictionalism offers a middle path: maintain the structure, abandon the metaphysical commitment. This approach may be most useful during periods of transition. Early in life, people follow moral rules because they are instructed to do so; later, as critical thinking develops, belief in objective moral truths may fade. Still, rather than dismantling the whole system, one can adopt a more pragmatic stance—acting 'as if' morality is real, just as people act 'as if' laws or social roles carry inherent authority, even when they understand them as human-made constructs. Myths in traditional societies served this function—not as literal truths, but as meaningful narratives that guided behaviour and gave coherence to communal life. The Trobriand Islanders, studied by Malinowski, upheld myths as sacred explanations for their customs, though they may have recognised their symbolic nature. The power of a myth lay in its capacity to shape action, not in its factual accuracy. Likewise, modern societies still need such guiding fictions. People seek meaning and shared orientation, even as literal belief becomes harder to sustain. Fictionalism allows continued participation in these moral frameworks without demanding full belief. It is like wearing a ceremonial mask: no one mistakes it for reality, but its ritual function remains potent. This approach is not without risks. If people forget that the myth is fiction, it may become dogma. If they stop engaging with it altogether, they may lose the benefits it provides. The challenge is to keep the fiction alive—playfully, critically, and with awareness. Myths, including morality, can guide action even when belief has faded.

Limits of moral responsibility

In 'The Moral Significance of Ignorance[306]', Michael J. Zimmerman confronts a basic but often misunderstood problem in ethics: what people ought to do when they do not know what they ought to do. He focuses on situations where ignorance affects both moral decision-making and our judgment of blame or responsibility. Not all moral failures are equally blameworthy. Sometimes people act wrongly but do not know they are doing so. Should they still be held accountable? Zimmerman begins by distinguishing between three views of moral obligation. The objective view says one must do what is best, regardless of what one knows. The subjective view says one must do what one believes is best. The prospective view, which Zimmerman defends, says one must act based on the best available evidence. This last view acknowledges that people rarely act with perfect knowledge. Instead of demanding omniscience or excusing everything, it makes obligation sensitive to uncertainty. A key example involves a doctor—Jill—choosing a drug for her patient, John. Drug A would fully cure him, but Jill does not know that. Drug B will help somewhat. Drug C will kill him, though evidence suggests it might work. The objective view says Jill must choose Drug A, even if she has no way of knowing it is best. The subjective view excuses any choice based on her belief. But Zimmerman shows how both extremes fail. The prospective view, by contrast, directs Jill to choose based on what the evidence suggests is most likely to help. This balances realism and responsibility. From here, Zimmerman explores how ignorance affects moral responsibility—the backward-looking judgment of whether someone deserves blame. Just because someone acted wrongly does not mean they are blameworthy. That depends on whether they should have known better. A person

[306] Zimmerman, M.J. (2008) The Moral Significance of Ignorance. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

can be wrong without being bad. Zimmerman introduces what he calls the origination thesis: to be culpable for ignorance, a person must have committed an earlier act or omission they believed was morally wrong. In other words, blame for ignorance must begin with a decision made in bad faith. Without that, ignorance may be unfortunate but not blameworthy. This idea has important consequences. Many people are blamed for actions rooted in misinformation or bad moral education. But if their ignorance was not caused by something they knew to be wrong, holding them responsible is unjust. Zimmerman argues that culpable ignorance is rare. Most ignorance is innocent. Blame, then, must be used carefully. Ignorance is not an easy excuse. But neither is it always a fault. If someone genuinely did not know and had no good reason to know, moral judgment should reflect that. The demand that people 'should have known' often relies on hindsight and unfair expectations. In uncertain moral terrain, responsibility must begin with what people could have known and controlled. Anything else risks mistaking tragic error for moral failure.

Against private language

Wittgenstein's argument against private language is not just a quirky philosophical puzzle. It challenges how people think about meaning, sensations, and what it means to understand another person. John Cook's analysis in 'Wittgenstein on Privacy[307]' helps clarify a topic often misrepresented. The core claim Wittgenstein makes is simple but radical: a truly private language—one where words refer only to sensations known by a single speaker—is incoherent. Not just impractical, but impossible. Many people think private language makes sense because sensations feel private. No one else can feel another's pain. This leads to the assumption that if sensations are private, then words referring to them must also be private. For example, a person might believe that when they say 'pain', the word directly refers to their private feeling. According to this logic, no one else could ever fully grasp what the word means, because they cannot access that private sensation. This is the first mistake. Wittgenstein challenges this reasoning by showing how flawed it is. Saying that no one else can feel another's pain is like saying no one else can cast another's shadow. That is true, but irrelevant. Just because you cannot feel someone's pain does not mean you cannot understand what they mean when they say they are in pain. Understanding does not require shared sensation—it requires shared practices, expressions, and reactions. He also questions the very idea of 'knowing your own pain'. To say 'I know I am in pain' adds nothing to the simple fact of being in pain. You do not learn that you are in pain the way you learn it is raining outside. There is no need for verification. The phrase 'I know I am in pain' only makes sense in certain situations—for instance, when you are trying to persuade someone who doubts you. But in most cases, the phrase is redundant or misleading. Cook draws attention to another key misunderstanding: the idea that words like 'pain' work like labels you attach to private sensations. But Wittgenstein says that's not how language works. Sensation words are learnt in context. A child learns to say 'pain' not by inspecting their feelings, but by crying, reacting, and having adults name what they see. These words are taught through shared experiences and expressions, not introspection. The meaning of 'pain' lies in its use in public language—not in a private mental note. Wittgenstein's famous beetle-in-the-box analogy illustrates this. Imagine everyone has a box with something inside called a 'beetle', but no one can investigate another's box. Over time, what is inside becomes irrelevant. What matters is how the word 'beetle' is used. Similarly, what one feels when saying 'pain' is less important than how the word is used in shared situations. In the end, Wittgenstein shows that language is not a mirror of private experience but a public activity.

[307] Cook, J. (1980) Wittgenstein on Privacy, in A.P. Martinich (ed.) The Philosophy of Language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Meaning depends on use, not inner reference. The dream of a private language—a code only one person can understand—is not just impractical. It is a philosophical illusion.

Problems of knowledge

In 'Language and Problems of Knowledge[308]', Noam Chomsky explores the deep structure of language and its central role in human cognition. At the heart of his argument lies the idea that every person is born with a language faculty—a biologically determined system in the mind/brain that makes language acquisition possible. This system, common to all humans, interacts with limited data from the environment to produce a rich and complex internal language. Chomsky calls this process an example of 'Plato's problem': how do people gain so much knowledge from so little evidence? Language is not just a means of communication. It is a cognitive tool that reflects how people think, imagine, and interpret the world. Even in infancy, when input is minimal, children quickly generate grammars that allow them to understand and produce speech. These grammars are not taught. They emerge from within, shaped by what Chomsky calls 'universal grammar'—a set of principles and parameters built into the human mind. The child's task is not to invent language, but to set the parameters based on what they hear around them. This innate structure explains why language acquisition is so rapid and uniform across cultures. Even children with disabilities, or those raised in impoverished linguistic environments, develop language with surprising depth. The system is robust and flexible, capable of building language from very little input. Studies on deaf children, who spontaneously invent their own sign systems when no formal language is available, further demonstrate the internal strength of the language faculty. Chomsky also draws attention to Descartes's problem: the creative use of language. People do not just repeat phrases they have heard. They construct entirely new sentences—many of which they have never heard before. This creativity cannot be explained by behaviourist models that treat language as learnt habit. Instead, Chomsky argues that linguistic performance must be guided by internal mental systems that are specifically structured for language use. This leads to another crucial insight: language is not learnt like riding a bicycle or solving a math problem. It is more like growing a limb. With the right environment, it happens naturally, almost passively. The data from experience merely triggers the growth of a structure that is already internally defined. Learning vocabulary may involve some memorisation, but the deeper syntactic rules emerge from within. Chomsky's framework shifts the study of language from behaviour to biology. He suggests that understanding the language faculty is essential to understanding the mind itself. Since language reveals how people think, it becomes a powerful lens for investigating cognition. But this study is still limited by ethical and technical constraints. Unlike the visual system, language cannot be studied easily in animals, because it appears to be unique to humans. Nor can children be placed in experimental conditions to observe language development directly. Still, progress is possible through theoretical models and careful linguistic analysis. These models aim to explain how universal grammar operates, how it can produce the variation seen across human languages, and how it allows for such richness and creativity from such limited data. Chomsky's work continues to shape the way people think about language—not as a social convention, but as a window into the architecture of the human mind.

[308] Chomsky, N. (1988) Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ignorance of language

Michael Devitt's 'Ignorance of Language[309]' challenges a central idea in modern linguistics: that people know the rules of their language as internal mental representations. Devitt critiques Noam Chomsky's Representational Thesis (RT), which claims that speakers have unconscious, propositional knowledge of grammar encoded in their minds. This knowledge supposedly explains their ability to judge what is grammatical and what is not. But Devitt argues that this way of thinking about language and the mind is mistaken. He suggests that linguistic competence does not require such internal representations. Chomsky's program begins with the idea that competent speakers 'know' their language. That knowledge, he argues, is embedded in a mental module—the 'language faculty'—which stores internalised rules. These rules, or principles, guide speakers in producing and understanding sentences, even if they are unaware of them. Chomsky describes this knowledge as propositional. Speakers, in this view, have internal theories or beliefs about their language, and their grammatical judgments follow from rational deductions based on those beliefs. Their intuitions, then, are like the 'voice' of this hidden competence. Devitt sees problems with this approach. He questions whether linguistic rules must be represented in the mind at all. A person might be competent in a language without knowing or mentally encoding any rules. Language use, he suggests, could be better explained through behaviour shaped by broader cognitive capacities, not by invoking theoretical knowledge inside the head. Devitt stresses a shift from 'knowledge' to 'competence'. Rather than assuming people store rules, linguists should focus on describing the structures that competence produces. Devitt introduces an important distinction between structure rules and processing rules. Structure rules determine what counts as a grammatically well-formed sentence. Processing rules, by contrast, describe how people produce or comprehend these sentences. The two kinds of rules are not necessarily the same. For example, in chess, a bishop moves diagonally—that is a structure rule. But how a player remembers or plans a bishop's move involves processing. In language, the same applies: a speaker might generate a correct sentence without following a mental 'rule' like a logic proof. They just do it, perhaps without knowing why it works. Importantly, Devitt argues that a grammar is not a theory of the mind but a theory of linguistic reality. The object of linguistic study is not what happens inside the brain, but the patterns, outputs, and structure of the language itself. A grammar, then, is a model of these external patterns—an idealised system that reflects the regularities of language use. Whether or not this system is mirrored inside the mind is a separate question. Devitt believes that linguistic research should not be tied to assumptions about mental representation. Chomsky's focus on 'I-language' (internal language) leads him to prefer studying idiolects—individual systems—over shared public languages. He also downplays the role of convention and meaning in communication, suggesting that people do not always aim for mutual understanding. But Devitt argues that this undervalues how central shared conventions are to communication. Without regular, stable meanings understood across a community, language would lose its power to express and convey thought. Finally, Devitt challenges the idea that language is separate from thought. Chomsky seems to hold that the two operate through different systems. Yet, if language expresses thought, then understanding thought's structure is essential to understanding language. Devitt believes the link between thought and language should be central to linguistic theory. 'Ignorance of Language' questions the belief that grammar lives inside the head. Devitt urges a return to external, observable language—what people say and how it behaves. His aim is to refocus linguistics on the patterns of language itself, and not on unverifiable mental

[309] Devitt, M. (2006) Ignorance of Language, Oxford University Press.

representations. This view, he argues, offers a clearer and more grounded approach to understanding linguistic competence and communication.

The ends of language

Søren Kierkegaard's writing resists clear definition. Was he a philosopher? A theologian? A writer of fiction? The question itself reflects the very tension that his work provokes—a tension between the authority of authorship and the instability of meaning. Geoffrey A. Hale, in 'Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language[310]', argues that this instability is not accidental but essential. Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, multiple styles, and rhetorical layering reveals a deeper commitment to exploring the limits of language as a medium for truth. If language cannot deliver certainty, then the very gesture of writing becomes an existential act of confrontation with its own failure. Kierkegaard deliberately undermines the notion that the signed name determines a text's meaning. The pseudonymous works, often treated as indirect theological commentaries, are not simply masks for hidden truth. They are performances of fragmentation. They confront readers with conflicting perspectives that are never harmonised. Hale insists that authorship and authority must be uncoupled. The name 'Kierkegaard' becomes a symbol of multiple voices, none of which can claim final interpretive dominance. Meaning emerges not from the author's intention but from the text's unresolved multiplicity and the reader's interpretive engagement. This leads to a different understanding of reading. Traditional interpretation aims to locate stable meaning, but Kierkegaard's writing denies that stability. As Hale explains, his work enacts the failure of system, of synthesis, and of absolute knowledge. Language is not a transparent conduit for ideas but a terrain of ambiguity, paradox, and irony. The reader becomes responsible for constructing meaning out of this disorientation. Rather than offering answers, Kierkegaard's texts expose the inadequacy of language to contain ultimate truths. Here, Theodor Adorno's early reflections on Kierkegaard become crucial. Adorno saw in Kierkegaard's style a resistance to conceptual closure. In 'Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic', he argued that Kierkegaard's aesthetic form is inseparable from his philosophical content. The aphorisms, pseudonyms, and ironic reversals are not decorative; they are the medium of thought itself. For Adorno, to think philosophically is to think through the failures of language, not around them. He writes that 'all philosophical critique is today possible as language critique'. This means that philosophical truth is not something separable from the way it is said. Thought and expression are entangled. Kierkegaard's writing dramatises this entanglement. His existential categories—despair, anxiety, subjectivity—cannot be detached from the stylistic form in which they appear. The dialectic of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages is not just a system of concepts. It is a way of writing. Each stage corresponds to a different rhetorical register. Each voice, whether Judge Wilhelm or Johannes Climacus, performs a limited vision of existence. The totality never arrives. There is no final synthesis. The reader is left with fragments, and these fragments resist unity. Hale underscores this point: to read Kierkegaard is not to discover a doctrine but to participate in a struggle. It is a struggle with the failure of language to bear the weight of metaphysical certainty. Kierkegaard does not offer a system of truth; he offers the breakdown of all systems. The 'ends' of language, in this sense, are both its goals and its limits. Language reaches toward transcendence and yet constantly falls back into finitude. The irony, repetition, and circular reasoning in his texts mirror this dynamic. This is why Kierkegaard's work remains deeply relevant. In an age saturated with communication, the idea that language fails remains a radical proposition. Kierkegaard teaches that meaning is not guaranteed by authority—whether religious,

[310] Hale, G.A. (2007) Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

philosophical, or linguistic. It is always contingent, always in flux. The reader cannot passively receive meaning but must undergo the anxiety of interpretation. This is not a flaw; it is the condition of existence. In this way, Kierkegaard's legacy is not a set of propositions but a mode of engagement. He does not argue for truth in the usual sense. He performs the impossibility of truth in language. To follow him is not to agree with a position but to enter a space of doubt, irony, and repetition. Meaning is not given. It must be lived, and its expression will always remain uncertain. Language, for Kierkegaard, is not a solution. It is the site of the problem. It marks the distance between thought and expression, between the infinite and the finite. His writing inhabits that distance, refusing to resolve it. And in doing so, it forces readers to confront not only the limits of language but the limits of themselves.

Freedom and interpretation

In the afterword of 'Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language', freedom is described as elusive—neither fully conceptualizable nor something that can be definitively possessed. As Geoffrey A. Hale writes, seek freedom within systems of thought—political, philosophical, or linguistic—is already to lose it. Freedom does not live inside ideals. It does not exist as a hidden truth waiting to be revealed. If anything, it exists in its absence, in its refusal to become stable or complete. To speak of freedom, then, is to speak of something that escapes language. It may be more accurate to remain silent than to try to name it. Concepts, by nature, are universal. They apply broadly and aim for consistency. But freedom is not consistent. If it were, it would be law, not freedom. A concept of freedom is already a limit on what freedom might be. To universalise freedom is to make it obedient to form, and anything obedient is not free. If freedom is to matter, it must exist in the moment, in the, in what is actual. Not in abstract ideals. Still, no author has entirely escaped the pull of the universal. Each writer returns to the tension between the fragment and the whole, between the finite and the infinite. They begin with the particular but feel the need to look beyond it. The alone cannot sustain meaning. Yet no universal ideal has ever managed to account for particularity without distortion. This is the problem freedom presents: it exceeds any system that tries to define it, but it also cannot stand alone as pure exception. This is where interpretation enters. Interpretation is not merely about understanding a text. It is about how one approaches the difference between the universal and the. Franz Kafka framed interpretation as a kind of responsibility. Not a duty to explain or justify a text, but a duty to remain with its strangeness, to refuse to reduce it. If freedom cannot be a concept but might still be a possession, what does that mean? And who possesses it? Interpretation, especially in the sense Adorno gives it, is not about resolving meaning. It is about attending to what breaks in the act of meaning-making. In 'Sprachkritik', or critique of language, Adorno sees philosophy itself as an interpretive act that never leaves language behind. It is not method, but response. It begins with the refusal of total explanation. It looks for the cracks in the surface of ideas, the places where universality fails. Those failures are the very material of interpretation. Adorno does not seek to unify meaning. He reads texts as ruins—remnants of thought that never fully hold. To interpret is to sort through fragments. Freedom appears not as some grand ideal, but in the movement between these pieces. Not as a truth to discover, but as a task to perform. Interpretation, then, is not liberation in the full sense. It is freedom within constraint—the kind that exists only when the speaker knows language is never enough and speaks anyway.

Decline of meaning

Ludwig Wittgenstein once listed Oswald Spengler as a major influence. This detail, often overlooked, seems surprising given how rarely Spengler appears in discussions of

Wittgenstein's work[311]. Yet the connection runs deeper than a passing mention. Spengler's sweeping vision of civilisational rise and decline, laid out in 'The Decline of the West', shaped more than just cultural history—it resonated with the anxieties and sensibilities that Wittgenstein later expressed in his philosophy. Spengler saw history as cyclical. Cultures bloom like living organisms, reach a peak, and eventually decline into sterile civilisations. Each culture, he claimed, has a soul—an inner style that cannot be translated or transferred. This notion of cultural insularity appealed to Wittgenstein. In his 'Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough', he criticised the anthropologist's attempt to explain so-called primitive rituals through the lens of modern scientific rationality. For Wittgenstein, Frazer failed to see that different cultures possess radically different ways of making sense of the world. This failure echoed Spengler's warning: no single framework can capture the meaning of all cultural forms. Though Wittgenstein never adopted Spengler's method or grand historical vision, he shared a sense of cultural exhaustion. In the preface to 'Philosophical Remarks', Wittgenstein described modern European life as disjointed and spiritually empty. Spengler's idea that the West had moved from culture to civilisation—a phase of decline marked by mechanisation, rationalisation, and loss of purpose—found a quiet echo in Wittgenstein's despair about the fragmentation of meaning in modernity. Yet Wittgenstein's response was not to retreat into historical fatalism. Instead, he turned to language—not as a vehicle for eternal truths, but as the everyday medium through which people live, act, and understand. His concept of language games in 'Philosophical Investigations' implies that meaning arises from usage within forms of life, not from abstract systems. Like Spengler, he distrusted universal explanations. But unlike Spengler, Wittgenstein focused not on historical cycles but on the structures of ordinary experience. Both thinkers rejected the idea of system-building. Spengler criticised Enlightenment rationalism: Wittgenstein abandoned the search for philosophical foundations. They preferred local understanding to universal theory. For Spengler, this meant viewing cultures as sealed worlds. For Wittgenstein, it meant paying attention to how language works in context. Though their projects were different, they shared a sense that modern thought had overreached—and that understanding must return to the ground of lived tradition. Their shared pessimism was not purely destructive. It opened the way for a kind of humility. Wittgenstein learnt from Spengler that the urge to totalise knowledge can obscure what is most real. What remains is not theory but attention—to the ordinary, the particular, the finite.

Fifth Chapter: USAGE

1. LANGUAGING

1.1. Languaging

(Practice of language: The activity of meaning-making)

'Languaging is a process through which we become intelligible to each other—not through rules, but through relation'.

— Deborah Tannen, Talking Voices

'Speaking is not about sending messages but about bringing forth a world with others'.

[311] DeAngelis, W. J. (1994) 'Wittgenstein and Spengler', Dialogue, 33(1), pp. 41–62.

— E. von Glasersfeld, Radical Constructivism

Language is not a thing

To speak of 'languaging' is to move away from the illusion that language is a fixed system of signs, structures, or symbols. It is instead to regard language as something people do, not merely what they have. The term itself resists reification. It shifts attention from language as product to the living act of speaking, listening, and meaning-making—a verb instead of a noun. This reframing allows one to see communication not as the transfer of ideas between two stable minds, but as the co-emergence of meaning between bodies, intentions, and environments. In this view, language is never isolated from the context in which it unfolds. A word, gesture, pause, or even silence acquires significance not by virtue of belonging to a universal code, but through the situation in which it is enacted. Theories of languaging reject the abstract separation between speaker and listener, mind and body, signifier and signified. Language, like perception, arises in the space between. It is relational. It is coordination. It is action. Humberto Maturana[312], who helped popularise the term, described 'languaging' as a coordination of behaviour within a consensual domain. Language does not merely describe the world—it helps bring it into being. The world that is known and shared is co-constructed through the ongoing act of languaging. In this sense, words do not stand for things; they participate in how things are made present. This shifts communication from a mechanism of transmission to a form of ontological emergence. Language is not a mirror but a lens. This emphasis on practice over structure also calls into question the foundational assumptions of traditional linguistics, which treats language as a system of signs to be mapped and decoded. But what if language is not stable enough for such treatment? What if it is always in flux, always becoming? Languaging, then, acknowledges the fluidity of communication—the way speech stumbles, adapts, recycles, and improvises in the face of context and need. Children do not learn 'language' as a set of rules; they learn to language, to participate, to attune. The implications are both philosophical and political. If meaning arises through interaction rather than pre-existing rules, then no interpretation can claim finality. There is no outside point from which to grasp the totality of meaning. All speech is situated. All meaning is negotiated. This calls for humility in discourse, a recognition that understanding is always partial, provisional, and embodied. Languaging foregrounds the fragility of mutuality, the difficulty of making oneself known, and the deep need for trust in all acts of speech. Rather than asking what language is, languaging asks: what are people doing when they speak? What worlds are they enacting, what relationships are they shaping, what futures are they making possible? Language is not an object; it is a dance of understanding, a lived negotiation of sense.

Freezing languages

Language often feels like something solid, like an object with parts you can name, classify, and dissect. In 'On Languaging and Languages[313]' Nigel Love challenges this idea. He argues that what we call 'a language' is not a naturally given thing, but a product of reflective activity—something that emerges from how people talk about language itself. Languaging, in this sense, refers not to a fixed code but to the dynamic act of making meaning through speech, gesture, or text. It is a continuous process, not a system stored in the mind. This distinction becomes especially important when considering how writing distorts our sense of what

[312] Maturana, H.R. and Varela, F.J. (1987) The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding. Boston: Shambhala.
[313] Love, N. (2004) 'On Languaging and Languages', Language Sciences, 26(6), pp. 609–628.

language is. Writing freezes language. It pulls words out of context, strips away tone, gesture, and situation, and presents language as if it were made up of stable, countable units. Through this process, signs become abstract. Words appear isolated and repeatable. This illusion gives rise to the belief that 'languages' exist out there—structures made up of fixed forms and rules that people use. Love warns that this abstraction feeds into a false ontology. It makes us believe in languages as objects when they are better understood as outcomes of reflective practices. When people speak, they do not access a stored grammar or a lexicon in the brain. They respond, adapt, improvise. They draw on memory, yes, but not as a rigid system. The grammar that linguists describe is a product of analysis, not something speakers necessarily use consciously. Love highlights how writing and linguistic theory together have led to a kind of reification. Linguistic units become things that appear to exist independently of the activity that generates them. This is a major problem when theorising about language acquisition or speech production. Another issue Love raises is the idea of 'orders' of language. He notes that speaking about language—using metalanguage—creates a second-order system. This second-order use shapes how people conceptualise first-order speech. Over time, the second-order becomes dominant, influencing education, theory, and even self-perception. A person might begin to think of their speech as 'correct' or 'incorrect' based on norms that arise from this metalinguistic layer. This is why Love urges us to pay attention to the act of languaging. When people use language, they are not always operating under a set of known rules or reproducing a shared code. They are engaging in a form of action, constructing meaning with others in real time. The concept of languaging places emphasis on emergence, on participation, on situatedness. It helps counter the illusion that language is a thing one can hold, describe, or store like an object. In the end, Love's point is simple but profound: talking about language shapes what we think language is. But this thinking, when unexamined, can create problems. To understand language better, one must return to the messiness of languaging—to its flow, uncertainty, and reflexive depth.

Everyday language

Classrooms are not only spaces for learning facts. They are places where identities are shaped through talk. 'Languaging Everyday Life in Classrooms[314]' David Bloome and Faythe Beauchemin argue that the way people use language in classrooms—what they call 'languaging'—plays a central role in forming what it means to be a person in that setting. Language here is not a thing but an activity. It happens in real time, between people. It is not stored in the brain like a dictionary but emerges in the flow of social life. Instead of treating language as a fixed system, this view sees it as a verb—something done. Languaging is how people act on one another. It is how they express themselves, respond, relate, and reveal who they are. Teachers, students, researchers, and even parents all take part in this process. Every moment of speech is part of a larger, living negotiation of values, roles, and recognition. The paper focuses on a specific classroom writing event to illustrate this. A student named Sarah, working with her peers in an AP English class, momentarily shifts from discussing her essay to speaking about her personal identity. Her peers respond, but soon the talk returns to the essay itself. This shift reveals a tension between two ways of seeing people. One treats the student as a full human being—a 'Thou' in Martin Buber's terms. The other sees her as a role-player—a 'It' within the structure of academic performance. Bloome and Beauchemin suggest that these shifts matter. When classrooms are built around measurable tasks and outcomes, personhood

[314] Bloome, D. and Beauchemin, F. (2021) 'Languaging Everyday Life in Classrooms', Language and Dialogue, 11(1), pp. 1–24.

risks becoming narrow. People are reduced to their ability to perform, produce, or comply. But when moments of real dialogue emerge, even briefly, students can affirm each other's complexity. Languaging, in this sense, becomes a moral act. It shapes how people are seen, and how they see themselves. This has implications beyond that one peer group. The way teachers talk to students, the way researchers describe classroom events, and the way school systems define 'success'—all of these contribute to a larger picture of who counts, and how. Languaging is never neutral. It reflects and reinforces deeper ideas about humanity, belonging, and recognition. Rather than ask what language is, the authors urge us to pay attention to what language does in daily interactions. They challenge the idea that competence in language is just about grammar or vocabulary. It is also about the ability to enter relationships, to be acknowledged, to participate meaningfully. In classrooms, this can either affirm or erode a student's sense of being seen. Sarah's moment of vulnerability was fleeting. But it showed how languaging can open a space for more human connection—even in a structured, academic environment. Recognising these moments helps shift the focus from performance to presence, from role to person.

Languaging as world-making

Language is often treated as something known—an object that can be studied, categorised, and explained. In 'Languages/Languaging as World-Making: The Ontological Foundations of Language[315]' E. Demuro and L. Gurney argue that this assumption limits what language can be. Instead of asking what we know about language, they propose we ask what language is, or more radically, what language does. This shift—from knowledge to being—moves inquiry into the realm of ontology. Language becomes not just a tool for describing the world, but a force that shapes it. It is world-making. The article draws from what scholars call the 'ontological turn', particularly in anthropology and language studies. This movement urges researchers to stop assuming a single reality and instead consider how different communities live in different worlds, with different languages that make those worlds possible. Demuro and Gurney explore this idea through three ontologies of language: language as object, language as practice, and language as assemblage. The first is the most familiar. Language as object assumes that language is a thing—structured, rule-bound, and separable from its users. This view underpins much of linguistics and language education. It treats language as a system that can be mastered, stored, and transmitted. But in doing so, it strips language of its context. It assumes a universal logic, ignoring how meaning depends on place, body, and relation. The second ontology sees language as practice. Here, language is not a static system but a set of actions. Speaking, listening, gesturing—these are all ways of being in the world. Language happens, not in isolation, but in interaction. This view has roots in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. It emphasises the local, the lived, and the emergent. Language is not used; it is enacted. Meaning does not pre-exist; it arises between people. The third and most complex ontology is language as assemblage. In this view, language is not a unified whole but a shifting network of elements—sounds, gestures, technologies, bodies, histories. It is not singular but plural. Not stable but contingent. This ontology draws on thinkers like Bruno Latour and decolonial scholars who argue that meaning-making always involves material, cultural, and political entanglements. Language is always more than language. It is embedded in power, memory, and resistance. All three ontologies—object, practice, assemblage—coexist in tension. Most societies rely on a mix of them. But treating one as definitive can obscure the

[315] Demuro, E. and Gurney, L. (2021) 'Languages/Languaging as World-Making: The Ontological Foundations of Language', Language and Intercultural Communication, 21(5), pp. 530–544.

others. Demuro and Gurney argue that language studies often default to the object view, especially in schooling and policy. This has real effects. It shapes what counts as knowledge, whose speech is recognised, and whose world is made visible. By shifting toward ontology, the authors invite a more expansive understanding of language. They want to decolonise how people think about linguistic difference. Instead of seeing some varieties as 'less developed' or 'incorrect', we can recognise them as different ways of being—different worldings. Languaging, in this sense, becomes more than communication. It becomes a political and existential act. Every time someone speaks, they do more than pass on information. They make a world appear. They position themselves, relate to others, and reconfigure what matters. The question, then, is not just 'What language do you speak?' but 'What world are you making when you speak?' By exploring language through ontologies, Demuro and Gurney offer a deeper, more pluralist approach. It is not about replacing one theory with another. It is about noticing how concepts of language shape research, education, and life itself.

Language as a local practice

Language is not a fixed code carried from one place to another. It is an action—something done, not something had. In 'Language as a Local Practice[316]', Alastair Pennycook argues that language must be understood not as a neutral system but as an activity shaped by time, place, and social relationships. Language is local not just because it happens in a place, but because it helps create the place in which it happens. To call language a local practice is to challenge the idea that language exists independently of use. Most linguistic theories start with language as a structure, a system with rules. But this view forgets the messy, embodied, lived nature of speaking. When someone talks, writes, gestures, or listens, they are doing more than exchanging words. They are enacting roles, shaping space, and negotiating meaning in real time. Language does not just describe the world—it participates in making it. The idea of 'local' does not simply mean 'not global'. It points to how all communication is rooted histories, geographies, and relationships. Even global forms like English are always used locally, in ways that reflect specific concerns and values. The postcard, Pennycook notes, is a good example. Writing a postcard is not just writing in English or French or any other code. It is a form of communication that depends on where you are, whom you are writing to, what you want to say, and how you want to be seen. It is local because it is shaped by the place and moment in which it has written. This approach shifts focus from language systems to language practices. What people do with language becomes more important than what language is assumed to be. Instead of asking how a pre-existing system is used in different situations, Pennycook asks how language itself emerges from those situations. Speaking in a classroom, texting a friend, or writing graffiti on a wall—each of these is a distinct practice with its own logic and force. Language here is not applied to context; it is part of the context's construction. Such a view challenges traditional distinctions between languages. In everyday life, people do not switch between sealed codes. They draw from a wide repertoire—gestures, dialects, bits of different tongues—to make themselves understood. Language is fluid, relational, and hybrid. This has implications for how language is taught, researched, and governed. Rather than enforcing boundaries between languages, policies and practices should attend to the diverse ways people already use them. Pennycook also argues that thinking locally is not anti-theoretical. On the contrary, it requires deeper reflection on how meaning is produced in space and time. Practices are not just habits—they are actions with histories. To understand them, one must explore how power, memory, and

[316] Pennycook, A. (2010) Language as a Local Practice. London: Routledge.

identity circulate through everyday speech. Language is never neutral. It carries with it ideas of who belongs, who is heard, and what counts as knowledge.

An embodied activity

In 'Language and Languaging[317]' A. L. Becker argues that to speak of language is always to speak about what it means to be human. Language is not just a system of sounds and meanings—it is a way of living in the world. The structuralist tradition, from Saussure to Chomsky, has long treated language as a closed system. It maps sounds to meanings through layers of syntax and rules. But Becker urges a different approach: to shift the focus from language as an abstract object to languaging as an embodied activity. This shift matters. Structuralist linguistics assumes that language exists independently of use. It imagines that grammar is innate, that rules exist in the mind before speech begins. Yet this view struggles with questions of time and change. It cannot easily explain how meaning shifts, or how people adapt speech in real situations. It flattens language into structure, ignoring history, memory, and intention. Becker challenges these assumptions. He questions the idea that language is simply a code for transmitting thoughts. Instead, he proposes that communication is orientational. It is less about encoding meanings and more about guiding attention—about helping others locate a perspective or share a stance. This view draws from Wittgenstein's language games and from the work of Maturana and Varela, who described language as a living interaction between organisms. Languaging, in this sense, begins not with abstract grammar but with memory. Children do not absorb rules—they remember fragments of speech, reshape them, and use them in new contexts. Language learning becomes a process of building a repertoire of remembered texts. Grammar emerges from this process as a set of useful strategies, not as a universal code. Becker uses his experience teaching Southeast Asian languages to show the limits of formal instruction. In languages like Burmese, knowing grammatical categories or vocabulary lists often does not help much. What matters is memory—the ability to recall utterances in their social setting, to understand how meaning arises from context. Languaging involves navigating space and time, not just applying rules. One of the key problems with structuralist models is their circular logic. They assume that meaning exists outside language and is merely mapped onto it. But if meanings are themselves shaped by language, then this model fails. It presumes what it should be trying to explain. Worse, it reifies language, treating it as a thing rather than a process. Becker's alternative is to treat language as human action. He proposes that what matters is not a system of sounds and meanings but the ongoing process of making sense together. Languaging, he argues, is always local, historical, and social. It is a dynamic activity that reflects and shapes how people live, think, and remember. Language, then, is not a fixed object. It is a way of being in the world—a form of remembering, orienting, and responding that unfolds over time.

Shaping meaning with others

Language is often imagined as a fixed system—something to be learnt, mastered, and applied correctly. But in everyday life, it works differently. In 'Everyday Languaging: Collaborative Research on the Language Use of Children[318]', Martha Sif Karrebæk, Lian Malai Madsen, and Janus Spindler Møller explore how children and youth use language not as isolated systems but as living practices. They propose a shift from thinking about separate 'languages'

[317] Becker, A.L. (1995) 'Language and Languaging', in Davis, H. and Taylor, T.J. (eds.) Redefining Linguistics. London: Routledge, pp. 139–149.
[318] Karrebæk, M.S., Madsen, L.M. and Møller, J.S. (2015) Everyday Languaging: Collaborative Research on the Language Use of Children and Youth. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

to seeing what people do with words in daily situations. The term languaging is key. It focuses on the activity of speaking, listening, reacting, and shaping meaning with others. Rather than labelling speech as Danish, Arabic, or English, this perspective highlights the fluid mixing, shifting, and repurposing of linguistic elements. In a multilingual and digitally connected world, children rarely stick to one language. Instead, they move between styles, tones, and vocabularies. These shifts are not random. They reflect social goals, group dynamics, and shared histories. The research was conducted in a Copenhagen school, where the authors worked closely with students from diverse backgrounds. What they observed was not chaos, but creativity. Young people actively made sense of their world through language. They shaped identities, built alliances, teased, resisted, and sometimes affirmed dominant norms. Their languaging was part of everyday play, conflict, and learning. It was not just a mirror of society—it was a way of shaping it. One important idea in the book is that meaning is not fixed in advance. It is made on the spot, in interaction. Children are not just users of inherited language systems; they are co-creators of meaning. The authors call attention to how specific utterances connect to broader social patterns. A single joke or turn of phrase can reflect family influence, peer group norms, or the pressure of institutional language policies. This view of language challenges the traditional idea of linguistic competence. It is not about knowing a standard form. It is about knowing how to navigate different voices, registers, and expectations. The students in this study demonstrate how deeply embedded language is in the social fabric of everyday life. Their language choices show how people adjust, resist, and innovate to fit their circumstances. Another key insight is that these linguistic practices are tied to larger social trajectories. Small moments of interaction—on a playground or in a classroom—accumulate over time. They shape how children see themselves, and how they are seen by others. Language becomes a tool for positioning oneself in a world of shifting values and power dynamics. This research encourages linguists to look closely, to stay grounded in real-life practice. By focusing on languaging, rather than abstract rules or ideal speakers, it becomes possible to understand how language is lived.

From language to assemblages

Language is often imagined as a system—a structure of words, rules, and meanings passed from one generation to the next. In 'Tracing New Ground: From Language to Languaging, and from Languaging to Assemblages[319]' Laura Gurney and Eugenia Demuro ask us to think differently. In their article, they explore how recent shifts in linguistics—especially the multilingual and ontological turns—invite a rethinking of what language is. The key idea they put forward is a movement from language as a thing, to languaging as an act. This change matters. It loosens the grip of old models that treat language as fixed, bounded, and stable. Instead, it brings attention to language as something people *do*—a way of being, acting, and responding in a world shaped by movement, interaction, and change. Languaging happens in real time, with real bodies, in specific situations. It draws from various resources—words, gestures, sounds, memories—and stitches them together in ways that fit the moment. The article draws from assemblage theory to go even further. Assemblage thinking sees the world not as made up of stable entities, but of shifting configurations—temporary gatherings of people, tools, histories, and ideas. Language, then, is not a thing we carry around. It is something that arises when elements come together. It is shaped by technology, emotion, institutions, and power. It shifts with context, evolves with time, and adapts as needed. Gurney and Demuro

[319] Gurney, L. and Demuro, E. (2020) 'Tracing New Ground: From Language to Languaging, and from Languaging to Assemblages', Journal of Sociolinguistics, 24(4), pp. 453–470.

argue that even within the multilingual turn, language is still often treated as divisible—this language, that code, this grammar. But real-life languaging resists neat boundaries. A conversation may mix slang, standard forms, and foreign words. A speaker may move fluidly across what institutions would call 'languages'. Rather than thinking in terms of language purity, the authors push for a recognition of this fluid, adaptive, messy practice. Their research challenges traditional assumptions: that there are pure forms of language, that monolingualism is the norm, or that communication is just the transfer of ideas between minds. Instead, they suggest that meaning is built in the moment—through touch, timing, repetition, and shared context. Languaging is not just symbolic—it is embodied and material. Assemblage thinking helps to make sense of this. It invites us to see how language is part of broader networks: political ideologies, technological tools, school systems, family traditions. No element stands alone. Meaning emerges through connections—connections that can shift, stretch, or break. By turning attention to languaging, Gurney and Demuro open the door to new kinds of research and reflection. They ask what language does in the world, how it moves through power, and how it changes the people who use it. Language is no longer an object to be studied from a distance. It is a practice to be lived and understood in motion.

Soft linguistic terrorism

Language shapes identity, and it also polices it. In his article 'Soft Linguistic Terrorism[320]', Mike Mena explores how institutions maintain control over people through the subtle regulation of how they speak. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of linguistic terrorism, which described the punishment of Chicanos for speaking non-standard forms of English or Spanish, Mena argues that a softer version now dominates—less violent, but just as insidious. This form does not punish directly; it persuades, rewards, and seduces people into conformity. At the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), over 90% of students are Mexican or Mexican American. The university brands itself as bilingual, yet the Spanish it values is not the local Spanish spoken in the region. It is a polished, distant, elite version—'Mexico City Spanish' or Castilian Spanish from Spain. Local speech, full of code-switching and regional flair, is quietly pushed aside. It is treated as unsophisticated, a barrier to success. Students are encouraged to 'polish' their Spanish—to improve it not for communication, but for marketability. Mena calls this process soft linguistic terrorism. Unlike the harsh punishments of the past, which banned Spanish in classrooms or beat it out of children, today's system works by creating incentives. Speak 'correct' Spanish, and you are more likely to succeed. Learn to code-switch in a way that mimics elite norms, and doors open. This is how power operates now—not through fear, but through desire. But the effect is the same: a devaluation of local identity and internalised shame about one's way of speaking. The article is grounded in interviews with students and faculty, many of whom describe a quiet but persistent pressure to distance themselves from their linguistic roots. One student, a poet fluent in academic Spanish, still asks his mother if his writing 'makes sense'. Her Spanish, spoken at home, carries emotional authority, but little institutional weight. Another student reflects on being told that improving her Spanish would make her 'more marketable', a phrase that hides coercion behind opportunity. Mena's own life illustrates this generational impact. His mother, punished for speaking Spanish in school, insisted her children speak English to avoid the same fate. Years later, Mena himself, as a teacher, would correct his students' Spanish, believing he was helping them succeed. Only later did he realise he was passing on the same ideology—teaching that success meant speaking

[320] Mena, M. (2023) 'Soft Linguistic Terrorism: 21st Century Re-Articulations', Educational Linguistics, 1(1), pp. 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1515/eduling-2023-0003

like someone else. What makes this process 'soft' is its subtlety. It masks hierarchy with the language of choice and opportunity. Institutions no longer need to punish overtly; they only need to create an ideal and reward those who move toward it. The rest are left behind—not by force, but by the quiet erosion of confidence, by the normalisation of inferiority. In the end, soft linguistic terrorism is not about language alone. It is about power, belonging, and the politics of respectability. To resist it, Mena argues, people must reclaim the value of their own speech. The Spanish of the Valley is not broken; it is rich, adaptive, and alive. Recognising its worth is a first step toward dismantling the systems that still teach students to feel less for speaking in their own voice.

1.2. Sociolinguistics

(Speaking Society: Language, identity, and social Life)

'There is no language outside of the situation; every utterance is a negotiation with context'.

— Dell Hymes, Foundations in Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of how language and society shape each other. It looks at how people speak, not just in terms of grammar, but within the social worlds they inhabit. Language is never neutral—it always carries traces of class, age, gender, region, and power. Sociolinguists study how people use language differently depending on who they are, where they come from, and what kind of relationships they have with others. The field connects closely with linguistic anthropology, pragmatics, and the sociology of language. It focuses on how communication works in real life, in everyday conversations, not just in idealised, standard forms. The questions sociolinguists ask are often shaped by practical realities: Why do people speak differently in school than at home? Why does a New Yorker sound different from someone in Mississippi? Why is one accent considered 'proper' and another 'lazy'? These are not just linguistic differences—they are reflections of social values. The roots of sociolinguistics can be traced back to early 20th-century dialectology. Scholars like Hans Kurath and Raven McDavid mapped dialects across the United States. But the shift toward sociolinguistics really began in the 1960s, when William Labov[321] began studying language variation in urban communities. Labov's research revealed that patterns of speech vary with social class and that these variations are systematic and meaningful—not signs of error, but of identity. Other major figures shaped the field in different ways. Dell Hymes introduced ethnographic methods to the study of language, emphasising the cultural and situational context of speech events. His SPEAKING model—setting, participants, ends, act sequence, keys, instrumentalities, norms, and genres—helped researchers analyze the deeper structure of real-world communication. Basil Bernstein, meanwhile, focused on how social class influences the kinds of language codes children acquire and how this affects their success in school. Sociolinguistic methods range widely. Researchers may conduct interviews, observe natural conversation, or analyze recordings. Some focus on dialect variation, mapping how pronunciation and grammar shift across regions. Others analyze how speakers switch between languages or dialects depending on context—a practice known as code-switching. Variationist sociolinguists use quantitative methods to chart patterns in large data sets, while discourse

[321] Labov, W. (1972) Sociolinguistic Patterns. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

analysts look closely at how meaning unfolds turn by turn in interaction. One of the core ideas in sociolinguistics is that language reflects social structures but also helps produce them. For example, the way someone speaks can reinforce or challenge social hierarchies. A working-class speaker may adopt standard grammar to signal authority in a job interview, or they may use regional slang to assert solidarity within their community. These choices are not random—they are shaped by complex social dynamics and personal aspirations. Another key concept is prestige. Some language forms carry overt prestige—widely recognised as 'correct' or 'educated'. Others hold covert prestige—valued within communities but stigmatised by outsiders. The way people shift between these forms reveals a lot about power, belonging, and resistance. Sociolinguistics continues to evolve. Today, researchers study online communities, multilingual cities, and transnational movements. The central insight remains language is social. Every time someone speaks, they are doing more than sharing information. They are positioning themselves, shaping relationships, and participating in the ongoing construction of society.

Social life of language

Language is not just a tool for communication—it is woven into the fabric of social life. In 'The Social Life of Language[322]', Gillian Sankoff shows how language reflects and reshapes human relationships, identities, and power structures. What sets her work apart is not only the depth of her fieldwork, but also the way she combines statistical methods with anthropological insight. Language, in her view, is always lived, always local, and always changing. Sankoff's research draws on examples from two strikingly different contexts: the city of Montréal and the small communities of Papua New Guinea. In both, she studies how languages evolve under pressure—whether from colonisation, migration, or the search for status. Her work is not confined to a single method. She uses ethnographic interviews, long-term participant observation, and quantitative analysis of speech data. Yet she does not treat variation as noise. She sees it as the very thing that gives language life. One of the book's central ideas is that language change happens through 'micro-evolution'. That is, not through sweeping historical shifts alone, but through daily choices made by speakers. These choices are not random. They respond to context, relationships, and intention. A speaker may change their pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar not because they forget a rule, but because they are signalling something—solidarity, authority, distance, or closeness. Language becomes a tool for social navigation. Sankoff is particularly interested in the role of style. People do not just speak; they style themselves through language. This connects her work to classical rhetoric, especially Kenneth Burke's idea of identification—how people use language to align with others or to set themselves apart. These stylistic choices are not superficial. They are shaped by deeper political, cultural, and historical forces. Her studies in Montréal, for instance, show how French speakers shift between more 'standard' and more 'vernacular' forms of speech depending on audience and setting. This is not just about grammar. It is about identity, belonging, and sometimes resistance. Language here becomes a field of negotiation. In a city where French is both the dominant local language and a marker of cultural survival, these small shifts carry weight. In Papua New Guinea, she examines Tok Pisin, a former pidgin that has become a national language. This transition, she argues, reveals how new languages emerge not just from mixing vocabulary but from people making meaning in new social arrangements. Language is not a fixed system. It adapts, stretches, and sometimes reinvents itself in response to need. What makes Sankoff's work powerful is her refusal to separate language from the people who speak it. She does not treat language as an abstract object. Instead, she listens—closely—to how

[322] Sankoff, G. (1980) The Social Life of Language. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

people speak, why they speak that way, and what those choices reveal about their place in the world. In doing so, she offers a model for sociolinguistics that is grounded, humane, and responsive to the complexity of lived experience.

The old man and the letter

In a small Gambian village, an elderly man sits with a younger neighbour, a pen in hand and words on the tip of his tongue. He cannot write, but he has something to say. With the help of the younger man, he crafts a letter—a formal request to help arrange a marriage. This moment, seemingly ordinary, becomes the centre of Kasper Juffermans' study in 'The Old Man and the Letter[323]'. It offers a window into how language and literacy are lived and shared in a multilingual, postcolonial society. The man, Ba-Abdoulie, is illiterate. He speaks Fula, Mandinka, and a bit of Arabic, but cannot write in any language. His stepson, Lamin, educated in English, needs help. A dowry must be arranged, and to do that, a letter must be sent. But in The Gambia, formal requests must be written in English. Not because English fits the message best, but because it holds the most power. English is the language of the state, of institutions, of doing things 'properly'. Even in rural spaces, it dominates the written word. Buba, a literate young man in the village, agrees to write the letter. Ba-Abdoulie dictates. Buba writes. Lamin's mother listens. The letter passes between hands, between oral and written, between languages. It is written twice—first drafted, then copied neatly. The letter itself is never fully seen, but its role is clear: it moves people, connects them, and reflects a web of relationships. This event is not just about writing. It is about languaging—the process of using language to navigate social life. Juffermans moves away from seeing languages as fixed systems and instead focuses on how people use whatever linguistic tools they must achieve their goals. In this village, everyone mixes languages. They switch between Mandinka, Fula, English, and Arabic, depending on who they are with and what they need. This is not confusion; it is skilful communication. It reflects what scholars call 'polylingual languaging'—drawing from a broad repertoire of language features to meet the demands of the moment. Literacy here is also not an individual skill. It is a social practice. When Ba-Abdoulie needs to write, he does not see his illiteracy as a barrier. He finds someone who can help. Writing becomes a shared act, involving many voices, shaped by oral memory, social roles, and cultural values. It challenges the Western idea of literacy as solitary and uniform. What emerges from Juffermans' account is a view of language and literacy as deeply human activities—messy, hybrid, adaptive, and always rooted in place. The letter might be written in English, but its heart is in Fula and Mandinka. Its grammar may follow school rules, but its meaning is grounded in relationships, family duty, and village life. This single act of writing tells a larger story about power, access, and the ways people continue to make meaning, even when they lack the tools that others take for granted.

Cultural politics of English

English is everywhere. From international diplomacy to pop music, from school textbooks to protest slogans, it has become the language that appears to speak for the world. But this global reach is not neutral. In 'The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language[324]', Alastair Pennycook argues that the spread of English cannot be separated from the histories of colonialism, capitalism, and global inequality. Pennycook begins with a stark contrast. One moment, the voice of a UN official welcomes alien life in English on the Voyager

[323] Juffermans, K. (2015) 'The Old Man and the Letter: Literacy and Languaging in a Modern Multiethnic Gambian Village', Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies, 123.

[324] Pennycook, A. (1994) The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language. London: Longman.

spacecraft. The next, a South African protest song echoes through a township, telling a story of dispossession in English. These scenes reveal two faces of the same language: one polished, official, and global; the other wounded, local, and contested. English, in this view, is not just a tool—it is a terrain of struggle. The idea that English is spreading 'naturally' or 'usefully' is, Pennycook argues, a myth. Behind its rise lie deep political forces. English has grown with empire, trade, media, and education systems designed to serve global capitalism. In many places, access to English means access to jobs, higher education, and social prestige. But this access is not equal. In postcolonial societies—from India to Kenya to Malaysia—English often divides rather than connects. It marks who belongs to the elite and who does not. Even where English is used fluently, it often carries the weight of someone else's values. To speak English fluently is often to be heard more clearly, but not necessarily to be understood. Pennycook insists that applied linguists and language educators must confront this fact. Teaching English, he argues, is not just a linguistic act—it is a political one. Whether in Hong Kong or Soweto, to teach English is to participate in global systems of inclusion and exclusion. Yet English is not only a tool of power. It can also be turned around. People in postcolonial societies use English in unexpected ways—to resist, to rewrite, to reclaim. In South Africa, 'People's English' became a language of protest. In Malaysia, the rise of Cantonese popular culture offers a counterweight to English. These are not just forms of cultural resistance—they are reminders that language is always being made anew. Pennycook's book calls for a different kind of engagement with English. Not just teaching grammar or pronunciation, but asking hard questions: Who benefits from English? Who is left out? How do we teach language without reproducing the very inequalities we might wish to challenge? To see English only as a bridge between nations misses the point. It is also a wall, a gate, a currency, a weapon. And for some, it is a language they were forced to learn, one they have since made their own. The politics of English, then, are not abstract—they are lived, contested, and unfolding every day.

Worldliness of English

English is not just a language. It is a way of living in the world. In 'The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language', Alastair Pennycook argues that the global spread of English cannot be understood without addressing its entanglement with culture, power, and history. This is not a simple matter of counting speakers or mapping dialects. It is about how English becomes part of people's lives—shaping how they think, what they value, and who they become. Too often, linguistics treats language as a sealed system. Words are studied without asking where they come from or how they are used. But people do not speak in isolation. They speak to others, in particular places, with stakes. Fanon once wrote that to speak a language is to carry a culture and a civilisation. Pennycook extends this idea: when someone speaks English, they do not just borrow words—they borrow ways of being. English is full of contradictions. It opens doors but also erects walls. In schools, courts, and media across the world, English offers access to power. But that access is uneven. Some speak it with ease. Others struggle. And often, the version of English that counts is not local, but modelled on Western norms. What appears as 'standard' hides systems of inequality. The idea of English as a neutral tool is seductive. But it is also dangerous. Pennycook warns against seeing English as simply helpful or efficient. That view ignores the histories of colonialism and empire that enabled its rise. It also ignores how English continues to shape global hierarchies today. Whether in Hong Kong classrooms or African parliaments, English is not just learnt—it is imposed, expected, and often demanded. This does not mean that English only dominates. It can also be resisted. In many places, people have reworked the language to express their own stories. English becomes protest. It becomes irony. It becomes local. But even this resistance

shows how deeply English is embedded in global life. Pennycook is critical of the way linguistics separates language from its surroundings. Terms like 'sociolinguistics' or 'applied linguistics' often serve to sideline the political. He draws on Edward Said's idea of 'worldliness'—of treating texts, and languages, as things in the world. Not abstractions, but part of real lives, shaped by real forces. To speak English, then, is not a neutral act. It involves choices, histories, and consequences. It places one within systems of meaning that stretch across borders. English does not float freely. It lands in places already marked by inequality. Understanding English means seeing it in context. Not just grammatical context, but social and political context. Its spread reflects a world order. Its dominance sustains that order. If we are to teach, use, or study English ethically, we must first acknowledge its worldliness.

Discourse and dependency

The idea of English as a global language often carries with it a quiet optimism. It is praised as the language of progress, mobility, and international understanding. But this view hides more than it reveals. In 'The Cultural Politics of English' Alastair Pennycook argues that global English is not a neutral vehicle of communication. It is shaped by power, history, and discourse—and it shapes them in return. To understand what 'international' really means, one must look closely at how the world is ordered. The claim that the world is getting smaller, repeated in slogans and media narratives, suggests a shared global space. But in truth, global connectivity moves along very uneven lines. People in the global North travel more easily, control more media, and speak more languages with privilege. English dominates not by accident, but by design. It is the voice of global corporations, of elite education, and of international diplomacy. But whose voice is it, really? Organisations like TESOL promote the idea of a global English-speaking community. Yet their conferences, structures, and policies often reflect the interests of wealthy, English-speaking countries. The phrase 'designing our world' used by TESOL in 1993, for example, raises urgent questions: Who is designing? Who is excluded? For whom is this 'our'? Dependency theory helps frame these questions. It explains how developing countries remain reliant on wealthier nations, not only economically but also through education and media. Schools often teach Western norms, and media systems replicate Western ideologies. Education becomes less a path to independence and more a tool of continued dependency. Within this framework, English is not just a skill but a sign of alignment with dominant values. Crucially, Pennycook calls for a shift away from deterministic accounts that see English as only a force of domination. While acknowledging English's role in perpetuating inequality, he emphasises human agency. People resist, repurpose, and reshape the language. In postcolonial contexts like cricket, English becomes both a tool of the empire and a site of resistance. The sport, like the language, carries layers of colonial meaning—but it also becomes a stage for cultural self-expression, defiance, and reclamation. To speak English is to enter a contested space. It is to draw on a system of discourse that carries power—but also to bend it, twist it, and make it say something new. Language is not static. It moves through people and places. It is formed by the struggles of its speakers, not just the structures of institutions. English is worldly not only because it is spoken across the globe, but because it is entangled in the cultural and political struggles that define our era.

Sociology of language

Language is not only a system of words and rules—it is also a deeply social practice. In 'Readings in the Sociology of Language[325]', Joshua A. Fishman explains how language and

[325] Fishman, J.A. (1972) Readings in the Sociology of Language. The Hague: Mouton.

society co-vary, shaping one another in systematic ways. While linguists have studied the structural variations between languages and sociologists have analysed the patterns of social behaviour, there has been a surprising lack of attention to the ways these two areas intersect. The sociology of language seeks to fill this gap by showing how social groups influence language use, and how language, in turn, reflects social dynamics. Languages vary by region, class, and formality. One may speak Boston English or New York English, each tied to a place. But even within those, people from different classes speak differently. The same person might speak more formally at work and more casually with friends. These shifts are not random. They follow patterns tied to social identity and social structure. What seems like 'just talking' is shaped by context, audience, and social expectations. Societies, too, have their own structures—dyads, families, peer groups, institutions, nations. People relate to one another through patterns of power, status, and roles. And in all these relationships, language serves as the main medium of communication. Therefore, if language patterns shift when social settings shift, it makes sense to study both together. Fishman argues that language behaviour must ultimately be understood in relation to society. That is why he prefers the term 'sociology of language' over 'sociolinguistics'. Sociolinguistics often focuses narrowly on how social variables affect language use. In contrast, the sociology of language starts from society and examines how language operates within its structures. Society is not a backdrop; it is the context in which language happens. The field is still developing. Early work borrows tools from both linguistics and sociology, but over time, it promises to become a distinct field with its own questions and methods. Part of what holds it back is the traditional separation between the disciplines. Linguistics, especially in the American tradition, has focused on formal grammar and abstract structures. Sociology, on the other hand, often avoids language and focuses more on large-scale data about institutions and behaviours. But things are changing. Sociology has grown more interested in small-group interaction and the role of language in shaping identity and social order. Issues like multilingualism, language shift, and language maintenance—once peripheral—are becoming central. Linguistics also benefits from this shift. It can no longer ignore that what looks like random variation in speech often reflects deeper social patterns. A speaker's age, ethnicity, religion, or class can all affect how they speak, when they speak, and what they mean. Language communities—groups of people who identify with a particular language—are defined by more than just linguistic forms. They involve shared norms, values, and histories. Some communities share a standard language but use different dialects. Others develop new forms through contact with other languages. These interactions often produce bilingualism, and in some cases, entirely new languages, such as pidgins or creoles. Language also shifts depending on the situation. A speaker might use one register at home, another in school, and a third at work. Registers are varieties of language tied to specific settings. They are shaped by expectations, roles, and goals. Understanding registers helps clarify how language functions in daily life. Ultimately, the sociology of language opens a fuller view of communication. It moves beyond abstract rules and explores how language reflects and reinforces social order. This approach provides insights into identity, power, inequality, and change—making language not just a tool for communication, but a mirror of society itself.

Sharing, talking, and giving

In her study 'Sharing, Talking, and Giving[326]' of the Kung Bushmen of the Nyae Nyae region, Lorna Marshall explores how this small-scale society manages to avoid hostility and

[326] Marshall, L. (1961) 'Sharing, Talking, and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions Among /Kung Bushmen', in Africa, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 231–249.

maintain peace through a delicate balance of customs, habits, and verbal practices. Though the Kung are not especially altruistic by nature, their need for one another makes mutual tolerance essential. Solitary life is not an option; survival depends on band membership, shared resources, and emotional closeness. Families live in close quarters, often sitting and sleeping side by side. Belonging is the only real form of security. This intimacy does not come without tension. The /Kung are watchful and cautious. Generosity is limited and mostly confined to close relatives—parents and children, spouses, siblings. Outside of that circle, help is not guaranteed. Marshall observed moments of indifference, even cruelty, when the sick or dying were ignored. Still, the threat of conflict hangs over these close relations. Poisoned arrows are never far from reach, and disputes, though rare, can turn violent. Because of this, the Kung have developed ways to defuse anger before it erupts. Talking is the key. Everyday conversation among the Kung is constant, a low hum of speech, laughter, and storytelling that fills the werf. This talk is not idle chatter; it is a vital social glue. People speak about food, hunting, gathering, and—especially—gift-giving. Gifts are a form of social accounting. Who gave what, when, and to whom matters deeply. Failures to reciprocate are noticed and talked about. A good giver is respected; a poor one may be quietly criticised as incompetent or selfish. While ordinary talk sustains social life, the Kung also have more intense forms of verbal exchange. One is the 'talk', an informal but emotionally charged meeting that erupts when there is serious disagreement. Marshall recounts a case in 1952, when a dispute over gift-giving led to shouting, accusations, and factionalism. In the end, the tension was resolved not by force, but through more talk—and eventually, the right gift. These 'talks' serve a judicial function, making collective grievance public and giving the group a way to regulate itself. Another form of speech is the 'shout'. This happens during accidents or crises—often loud, anguished, almost explosive. When two shelters burnt down due to children playing with fire, the community responded with this kind of speech: unfiltered, emotional, and cathartic. Shouting allows the group to vent without turning anger on each other. There is also repetitive speech, used when someone feels neglected or anxious, especially around food. A woman might repeat that she has not eaten or been given enough. It is not a plea for conversation, but a release of internal pressure. These patterns of speech—casual, confrontational, emotional, or obsessive—help manage tension. By externalising conflict, they prevent it from festering. What Marshall found was not a peaceful society by nature, but a community that had developed specific tools—gift exchange and constant communication—to handle its own fragility. Speech, in its many forms, becomes a system of relief, a kind of valve that lets pressure escape before it turns to harm.

Social structure and language

Philip K. Bock's 'Social Structure and Language Structure[327]' is an exploration of the parallels between language and social systems. It opens an important path in anthropological thinking. His aim is not to repeat Whorf's focus on how language reflects cultural values, but to treat language and social behaviour as structured systems within a broader cultural framework. Both can be analysed in terms of their parts, their internal rules, and how they interact with their surroundings. Bock begins by defining cultural forms as shared expectations or understandings that influence behaviour. Language is one such form—its rules and categories are learnt, shared, and unconsciously followed. The way people know which words or forms to use mirrors how they know what behaviour fits a social role. Linguistic units, like morphemes, are shaped by internal rules and external contexts. Similarly, roles like 'teacher' or

[327] Bock, P.K. (1964) 'Social Structure and Language Structure', in American Anthropologist, 66(6), pp. 1325–1341.

'parent' have expected behaviours that change depending on time, place, and the other roles involved. A core insight here is that individual behaviours or words are meaningless alone. They gain sense from the structure they belong to. A sound only becomes a phoneme in a language because of contrast and pattern. A gesture or task only defines a role when placed in a larger web of expectations. This leads Bock to compare morphemes with social roles: both have variants (like allomorphs or role adaptations), and both take on meaning depending on context. Consider a teacher. The expectations for how they act shift depending on whether they are with students, peers, or a principal. These variations echo how a word changes form depending on grammar or pronunciation rules. Just as a morpheme's shape adjusts in different environments, a social role flexes depending on who is presenting what is happening. Time and space also matter. Bock introduces the idea of the 'situation-matrix' to map out how roles, spaces, and periods align. A classroom, for example, is not just a place. It is a structured situation where certain times (class periods) and spaces (seating arrangements, the front of the room) cue particular behaviours. These patterns help define who does what, where, and when. The situation becomes a kind of grammar for social behaviour. He illustrates this with the Micmac Indian wake. This event has a clear structure: specific roles (mourners, speakers), defined spaces (where people sit, the location of the body), and a sequence in time (from death to burial). Rather than analysing its meaning, Bock charts its form. Like a linguist analysing syntax, he shows how people follow an unspoken system of cultural cues to know how to behave. In both language and social life, structure is what allows shared understanding. The analogy between the two is not just metaphorical. It helps reveal the deep, often invisible, organisation behind everyday life.

Directions in sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics as a discipline took shape out of dissatisfaction with traditional linguistic approaches that ignored the social contexts of language. Instead of treating language as an abstract system detached from its users, sociolinguistics asks how language functions in people's everyday lives. In 'Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication[328]', edited by John J. Gumperz, this shift in orientation becomes clear: language is no longer seen merely as form but as patterned social behaviour shaped by context and culture. Gumperz and Dell Hymes argue that to understand language, one must examine how people use it in real situations, and how this use reflects broader social structures and relationships. Their volume helped define the field by insisting that linguistics must move beyond syntax and phonology and into the real, messy world of speech. The early chapters trace the historical background of sociolinguistics. Scholars once focused on extinct languages or literary texts, treating language like a biological organism that evolved in isolation. The aim was to reconstruct language families and trace their development. But this left out the living, changing practices of people using language. Others shifted attention to local dialects, trekking into rural communities to collect speech samples, yet even these efforts often treated language change as a mechanical, law-like process, not a human one shaped by migration, conquest, or interaction. The emergence of descriptive linguistics and later generative grammar made language seem even more internal and abstract. Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between langue (the shared system) and parole (individual speech acts) helped linguists separate structure from use. But this division also risked severing language from its speakers. Chomsky's generative grammar focused on the mental rules behind sentence formation, emphasising a

[328] Gumperz, J.J. (ed.) (1982) Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication. Oxford: Blackwell.

universal capacity for language rather than the social conditions in which speech takes place. For many sociolinguists, this was a step in the wrong direction. What Gumperz and Hymes introduced instead was an ethnographic lens—a way of looking at language as a cultural activity governed by tacit rules and social norms. The central idea was that speech communities develop their own systems of meaning, often invisible to outsiders. Hymes coined the phrase 'ethnography of speaking' to describe this research method. It involves watching how people talk, where they talk, with whom, and under what expectations. What counts as appropriate or meaningful speech depends on those local norms. Rather than viewing language as one standard system with minor local variations, sociolinguists began to explore how speakers shift styles, codes, and registers depending on the context. This became especially important in multilingual and multiethnic communities, where people navigate several languages or dialects daily. In such settings, language becomes a resource for signalling identity, belonging, or resistance. Labov's work in New York City, for example, showed how class and ethnicity shaped the pronunciation of certain sounds. Middle-class speakers altered their speech in more 'prestigious' settings, while others maintained vernacular forms tied to community identity. These variations were not random; they reflected patterns of power, aspiration, and cultural affiliation. Hymes insisted that sociolinguistics must study 'rules of speaking'—the unwritten codes that guide when to speak, how much to say, what tone to use, and what language to choose. These rules differ widely between communities. What counts as polite, assertive, or disrespectful speech is not universal. One group's silence may be another's insult. Finally, Gumperz and his collaborators argued that understanding language use requires fieldwork. You cannot learn about real communication in a laboratory or from written texts alone. You must go where people live, talk, argue, joke, and perform their identities. This is why sociolinguistics places the speech community—not the abstract language system—at the centre of its inquiries. By weaving together anthropology, linguistics, and sociology, 'Directions in Sociolinguistics' laid the groundwork for a dynamic view of language. It taught that language is not just a tool for expressing ideas but a medium for organising social life. It changes with relationships, adapts to power structures, and helps construct the very communities that use it.

1.3. Applied Linguistics

(Speaking practice: From grammar to global power)

'To language is to live meaning—not merely to describe it, but to co-construct it in the flesh of the moment'.

— Alastair Pennycook, Language as a Local Practice

Pronouns of power and solidarity

Roger Brown and Albert Gilman's essay 'The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity[329]' traces how forms of address reflect social relationships. Their focus is on the use of pronouns in European languages—how speakers choose between formal and informal second-person pronouns, and what that choice reveals about social order. The history begins with Latin, where tu was singular and familiar, while vos was plural. Over time, vos came to be used as a singular pronoun of respect, first for Roman emperors, then gradually in broader aristocratic and clerical

[329] Brown, R. and Gilman, A. (1960) 'The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity', in Style in Language, edited by T. A. Sebeok. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 253–276.

circles. This shift framed the plural as a linguistic marker of elevated status. The practice spread through Europe, evolving into distinctions like tu/vous in French, du/Sie in German, and tú/usted in Spanish. The choice between these forms has rarely been neutral. It reflects a balance—or imbalance—between power and intimacy. One can speak down with tu, and up with vous. In traditional hierarchies, nobles addressed commoners with the informal, while expecting deference in return. The same applied in families, schools, and churches: superiors spoke informally; inferiors responded formally. This asymmetry forms what Brown and Gilman call the 'power semantic'. The relationship determines the pronoun, not the emotional bond. A bishop and a peasant might never share solidarity, but the bishop uses tu while receiving vous. Power, not friendship, governs their speech. But another axis of meaning appears—solidarity. Here, the relationship is equal, based on closeness or shared identity. When two friends use tu with one another, it signals mutual familiarity. Solidarity is marked by reciprocal pronoun use, not hierarchical distinction. You use tu if I do. Our equality is linguistic. Brown and Gilman show that pronoun systems balance both power and solidarity. Sometimes one dominates. In a rigid monarchy, power matters most. In modern democracies or among peers, solidarity may take over. The French Revolution, for example, sought to eliminate feudal address altogether. Radicals condemned vous as aristocratic and imposed tu as the egalitarian default. The Quakers did something similar in England, using thou universally to level social differences. Pronouns also express group style. Conservative groups tend to retain formality; radicals break it. In literature and politics, writers have chosen pronouns deliberately to express class, intimacy, or dissent. After World War II, there was a marked shift in many countries away from rigid forms of address. Egalitarianism became the new norm. In offices, homes, and schools, tu and its equivalents gained ground. But the tension remains. A single pronoun can mean welcome or disrespect, depending on who uses it. In today's multilingual, multicultural societies, the choice of address still carries weight. It may signal inclusion, distance, resistance, or hierarchy. The simple act of choosing a word—just one word—can capture the entire structure of a relationship.

Linguistic communities

John J. Gumperz explores how language structure reflects and interacts with the structure of society. In his essay 'Types of Linguistic Communities[330]', he questions the traditional division between linguistic and anthropological analysis. Linguists often focus on the structure of a single language, while anthropologists study specific communities. This disconnection, he argues, limits our understanding of how language works in social life. For instance, when linguists speak of 'English', they often mean an abstract system. But English includes many forms: rural dialects in Britain, urban slang in the U.S., creoles in Africa, and pidgins in Asia. Treating these as a single language ignores the wide variation found in everyday speech. Linguists have historically treated stylistic variation or borrowed words as peripheral, not central. This perspective is useful for typology or historical linguistics but less so for understanding how people use language in society. Gumperz advocates moving away from this monolithic view. Language should be seen as a network of overlapping codes, each shaped by social interaction. He draws on Jakobson's idea of multiple 'subcodes' within a language. Just as societies are composed of interacting institutions and roles, languages are composed of interacting registers, dialects, and languages. Complexity, in both cases, lies in the relationships between parts—not in internal unity. Traditionally, sociolinguistics focused on how languages

[330] Gumperz, J.J. (1968) 'Types of Linguistic Communities', in Readings in the Sociology of Language, edited by J.A. Fishman. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 460–472.

evolve over time. Sapir, for example, emphasised 'drift'—internal linguistic change—over external social forces. Gumperz challenges this. He draws on Boas and Emeneau, who studied how neighbouring languages influence one another. Their work shows that shared geography and culture often shape how languages borrow, adapt, and evolve. Gumperz shifts the focus toward linguistic communities. These are not defined by a single language but by social patterns of interaction. A linguistic community may be monolingual or multilingual. Its boundaries are not always geographic. In many urban and immigrant settings, people move between multiple linguistic worlds. Speech communities overlap, and individuals often shift codes depending on who they are talking to. To describe this, Gumperz uses the concept of the 'communication matrix'. This includes the social roles people play (like teacher or priest), the settings they move through, and the speech codes attached to each role. These roles come with expected behaviours and forms of speech—what he calls 'diacritics'. The speech codes themselves form a 'code matrix', which might include dialects, specialised jargon, or different languages altogether. In tribal or rural societies, people may switch between a local dialect and a regional language, depending on the setting. In caste-based societies, language often reflects rank—elites use 'high' forms for ceremony, while the majority speak 'low' forms in daily life. Intermediate societies, with more economic and occupational variety, show even more linguistic complexity. Urban centres, by contrast, often push toward linguistic uniformity. Dialects merge, and role-specific language gives way to general stylistic variation. Gumperz concludes that linguistic communities are not static. They evolve as societies change. By studying these communities, scholars can better understand how language operates in the real world—not as an abstract system, but as a living social practice.

Posthumanist applied linguistics

In 'Posthumanist Applied Linguistics[331]', Alastair Pennycook proposes a radical rethinking of language through the lens of posthumanism. He begins by questioning the very idea of 'the human' as the central figure in language and meaning-making. The book opens with a sharp awareness of contemporary global crises—refugee displacement, rising nationalism, economic inequality—and asks whether the idea of a unified human subject still offers meaningful solutions. While human rights and liberal democracy remain guiding ideals, they are often contradicted by ongoing human destructiveness. Pennycook suggests that it might be time to step outside the human-centred view and reimagine our relationship with the world. Posthumanism, he argues, is not about rejecting humanity but about questioning the supremacy of humans in thought and politics. It asks what happens when humans are seen not as isolated agents but as entangled with animals, machines, environments, and other non-human actors. This is especially relevant for applied linguistics, a field historically rooted in humanist ideals. Language has long been seen as a uniquely human capacity, a tool for rational thought and individual expression. But this view now seems limited. If humans are not autonomous, self-contained subjects, then neither is language. Pennycook points to distributed cognition theories—like those of Hutchins and Clark—which show how thinking does not just happen in the head. It happens in the body, in tools, and in spaces. A scuba diver navigating underwater does not rely only on memory or instinct. They use maps, environmental cues, and bodily sensations. These distributed processes challenge the idea of the mind as an internal, sealed system. Language, like thought, must be seen as something extended and embedded in the world. Applied linguistics can draw on this insight. Rather than focusing only on individual language competence or formal grammar, posthumanist applied linguistics sees language as

[331] Pennycook, A. (2021) Posthumanist Applied Linguistics. London: Routledge.

part of a broader ecology. Words, gestures, technologies, environments, and even objects—like menus or zucchinis at a market—become agents in the production of meaning. This leads to a view of language as a 'semiotic assemblage': a network of signs, bodies, and materials that together create communication. This also transforms how researchers think about repertoires. Traditional sociolinguistics defines a linguistic repertoire as the range of styles or dialects an individual can use. But Pennycook and Otsuji suggest that repertoires should be understood spatially and socially. In a kitchen, for instance, communication happens not just through speech but through smells, gestures, tools, and timing. These are not background conditions—they are part of the language event itself. Posthumanism challenges the anthropocentrism at the heart of linguistic theory. It argues that human language does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped by and shapes the material world. This includes non-human animals, physical tools, technological systems, and environmental constraints. The Anthropocene—a term for our current age of human-caused planetary change—makes this even clearer. If humans have reshaped the Earth's geology, climate, and ecosystems, then language must also be seen as implicated in these transformations. Importantly, posthumanist applied linguistics is not just theoretical. It has consequences for education, policy, and ethics. It calls for new ways of teaching language that acknowledge material realities, environmental crises, and technological mediations. It asks educators and researchers to move beyond models of isolated subjects and toward relational, ecological, and embodied understandings of communication. By shifting the focus from the autonomous human subject to networks of humans and non-humans, posthumanist applied linguistics invites a deeper, more situated understanding of language. It asks us to consider how language emerges not from individual minds, but from the interplay of bodies, spaces, tools, and meanings. In doing so, it redefines what it means to speak, learn, and think in a changing world.

Mutual misunderstanding

Language is often seen as a bridge between minds. It is assumed that people speak to be understood, and that understanding happens when both parties use the same language. In applied linguistics, this belief has shaped how researchers approach multilingualism, communication, and English as a lingua franca. Barbara Seidlhofer, for example, argues that users of a global English tend to adapt their language use consciously to achieve mutual intelligibility—even without shared native norms. The goal, it seems, is always understanding. But what if understanding is not the whole story? What if miscommunication reveals more about language than agreement ever could? In 'Posthumanist Applied Linguistics' Alastair Pennycook questions the assumption that communication always leads to mutual comprehension. Instead of viewing misunderstanding as a breakdown, he sees it as a natural part of interaction. Language is not simply a neutral tool for transmitting ideas; it is embedded in social and political contexts, shaped by power, inequality, and difference. Shared language does not guarantee shared meaning. People negotiate, improvise, and misunderstand constantly. These are not failures—they are how communication happens. Traditional models imagine language as a closed system: fixed meanings, shared rules, clear exchanges. But language in use is messier. It crosses boundaries. It flows between tongues. It adapts to space, time, and body. Pennycook introduces the idea of semiotic assemblages—language as one element in a mix that includes gesture, material objects, and social context. A menu, a hand signal, a mispronounced word—all shape how meaning is made. This shift reflects a posthumanist turn in linguistics. It moves beyond the view of language as a human-centred system of signs. Instead, it sees meaning as emerging through interaction with other people, places, and things. In a busy kitchen or a street market, language is not just in the head—it is in the space, the

rhythm, the objects around you. A rotting zucchini or a steaming plate may speak as loudly as words. Posthumanist linguistics challenges the fantasy of perfect communication. It asks not how humans master language, but how language happens among humans, animals, machines, and environments. Mutual understanding is no longer the aim. Instead, the focus shifts to alignment and attunement—how people adjust to each other and to the situation. Meaning arises not from shared code, but from shared attention, shared action, and shared space. Rather than lamenting the collapse of shared norms, posthumanist linguistics embraces the noise. It recognises misunderstanding, improvisation, and ambiguity as part of communication. It breaks down the idea of language as a human monopoly, and opens the door to new ways of thinking, speaking, and being—with and beyond words.

Language in a globalised world

In a globalised world, language no longer moves only with geography—it travels with people, ideas, and power. In 'Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact[332]', Khawla Badwan argues that language is not just a neutral tool of communication but a dynamic site of inequality, identity, and resistance. The global spread of English is a prime example: its rise has less to do with its linguistic qualities and more to do with colonial history, economic power, and political influence. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the linguistic market is key to understanding how language operates under capitalism. Language, he argued, acquires value not because of its structure but because of the social status of its speakers. A language is worth what its speakers are worth. This means that languages linked to powerful nations—like English or French—are given higher value, while others—such as Wolof or Welsh—are treated as marginal or even 'pointless'. These values are not fixed; they shift with global trends, economic shifts, and ideological regimes. But they always reflect who has the power to speak and be heard. Globalisation intensifies this uneven terrain. English becomes a passport, a currency of mobility. It is marketed as a path to jobs, education, and social mobility. In many countries, people invest time and money into acquiring it, hoping to access the global stage. But the market is not open to all. Those who cannot speak English fluently, or who speak it with the 'wrong' accent, often find themselves excluded or devalued. This is not just about language proficiency—it is about race, class, nationality, and history. Badwan urges a more human approach. Language is not only economic capital. It is how people grow, connect, and belong. Children learning their mother tongue are not investing in the market; they are building a sense of self. Language can bring joy, intimacy, memory. It can also carry trauma, shame, and exclusion. A son struggling to speak his grandfather's language over Skype during lockdown is not thinking about employability he is trying to say 'I love you' in a language that carries emotional weight. Neoliberal ideology reduces language to a product—something to buy, sell, and rank. It creates hierarchies of 'useful' and 'useless' languages, stripping away their cultural and emotional life. Badwan resists this logic. She shows that language is also therapy, resistance, and love. During COVID-19, her home was filled with Arabic, not because it added market value, but because it reconnected her children to their heritage. Yet even in moments of beauty, language remains political. A neighbour finds comfort in Hindi songs. Another family is judged for speaking a 'foreign' tongue. These interactions reveal that language is never just personal—it is shaped by policies, prejudices, and histories. To speak of language today is to speak of the world: unequal, mobile, fragmented, yet still filled

[332] Badwan, K. (2021) Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

with the potential for connection. The challenge is to protect this human side of language from being drowned in the noise of profit and power.

Language and identity

In the world of today, language and identity no longer sit neatly within national borders. The idea of 'one language, one nation' still dominates public discourse, but everyday experience tells a more complex story. In 'Language in a Globalised World', Khawla Badwan argues that language is not a static system, but a fluid, relational, and emotional practice that deeply shapes and reflects identity. Traditional definitions of language—like those found in dictionaries—tend to focus on grammar, vocabulary, and national affiliation. They treat language as a closed system, bound to a people, a flag, a territory. But this view conceals the diversity and instability of actual language practices. In classrooms, homes, streets, and online spaces, people blend languages, switch codes, and speak in ways that do not fit textbook rules. Yet institutions often ignore this messiness. They privilege 'standard' languages, marginalising dialects, accents, and mixed forms. Language becomes a gatekeeper of legitimacy. This gatekeeping extends to identity. Who belongs? Who is seen as fluent, articulate, and intelligent? These judgments are made through language. An accent can mark someone as foreign. A dialect can mark someone as uneducated. A child refusing to speak their home language at school may already feel that it is a liability, not an asset. Language does not just express identity—it can repress or disfigure it, depending on which language, and where. Badwan shows how neoliberal ideologies shape these hierarchies. Languages are ranked by market value. English is celebrated for its 'utility' and global reach, while other languages are reduced to cultural tokens or obstacles. A child may be praised for speaking French but shamed for speaking Somali. This reflects not linguistic reality but global power structures. Languages of empire, trade, and academia are celebrated. Others are erased or exoticised. But identity is not fixed. It shifts across contexts. Edward Said described the strangeness of living between two languages and two worlds. For him, bilingualism was not a technical skill—it was a dissonant experience that shaped how he saw himself. Speaking one language often meant leaving another behind. Badwan recounts a similar tension when her child told her not to speak Arabic at school. The child was not being cruel; he was adapting. He had already sensed that Arabic did not belong there. In trying to belong, he pushed part of himself—and his mother—aside. Language is where such conflicts play out. Yet it is also where healing begins. Badwan describes walking in Germany and hearing an Arabic song by Fairouz. In that moment, she was no longer an academic, a migrant, or a UK citizen. She was a daughter, a listener, someone momentarily held by sound and memory. This is the power of languaging: it opens identity spaces beyond the roles imposed by society. Language is not just performance—it is presence. In her research with Tunisian students, Badwan found that languages carried emotional weight. Arabic connected students to family and faith. French carried both prestige and colonial history. English was a key to global futures but sometimes felt alien. None of these languages stood alone. Together, they formed what one might call an identity repertoire—fluid, overlapping, and context-bound. To speak, then, is not just to communicate. It is to choose, to remember, to resist, and to belong. Language in a globalised world is never neutral. It is a practice of becoming.

Global linguistic flows

Hip Hop is not just a music genre—it is a global conversation. In 'Global Linguistic Flows[333]', H. Samy Alim and Awad Ibrahim explore how Hip-Hop travels across borders, languages, and identities, becoming a powerful space for linguistic innovation and cultural resistance. Alim frames this process through the idea of the cipha, a dynamic and improvisational exchange of rhymes, where artists do not just perform but engage in a deep linguistic and cultural dialogue. The cipha becomes a metaphor for the global circulation of ideas, sounds, and styles—a space where language is both art and politics. Alim shows that Hip Hop's language is never static. In a Shanghai rap battle, MCs switch between Mandarin, Shanghainese, and English, not to show off but to claim space, to be heard. Hip Hop in this context is not just imported from the U.S.—it is remade, revoiced, and reimagined by those who use it. This constant reinvention challenges the idea of cultural purity. Instead, Hip Hop becomes a site of métissage—a mixing of codes, styles, and histories. Awad Ibrahim develops this further. For him, Hip Hop is not only global, but also pedagogical. In his essay 'Takin' Hip Hop to a Whole Nother Level', Ibrahim introduces the idea of the 'Creative Margin Curriculum'. This is the education young people receive outside of school, through beats, rhymes, and resistance. It is what schools do not teach but what youth live and learn every day. Hip Hop becomes a form of knowledge—of naming one's condition, of building identity, and of imagining other futures. Ibrahim borrows from Édouard Glissant to describe this as vertical and horizontal métissage. Horizontal métissage is cultural borrowing across borders, like German or Japanese youth rapping in American styles. Vertical métissage, however, is deeper—it transforms dominant languages like English or French by filtering them through local accents, idioms, and experiences. Tanzanian artists blend Swahili and African American English to create 'raplish'. In doing so, they do not just imitate—they make something new, something rooted. Language in Hip Hop is never neutral. It is political. It signals identity, claims space, mocks authority, or builds solidarity. Alim refers to this as the politics of language in the Global Hip Hop Nation—a transnational yet local community linked not by geography but by shared practices and struggles. Within it, linguistic choices carry weight. Codeswitching, slang, dialect—all of it becomes a performance of self and a confrontation with dominant ideologies of race, class, and belonging. Both Alim and Ibrahim emphasise affect. Hip Hop is about feeling. One MC says he felt like Tupac was speaking directly to him, even though they were separated by oceans and decades. That emotional resonance—recognition in a rhyme—is part of what gives Hip Hop its global power. Young people hear their own stories, pain, and hopes reflected in the lyrics. Through this identification, they become part of the culture, not as imitators, but as co-creators. In this way, Hip Hop becomes a form of 'world-making'. It does not just reflect reality—it remixes it. Ibrahim sees this as a challenge to formal education. Instead of ignoring the language and culture of youth, schools could learn from Hip Hop's pedagogy of affect, where identity and emotion are not distractions from learning but its starting point. 'Global Linguistic Flows' ultimately invites readers to rethink what counts as language, as learning, and as power. It reveals how Hip Hop serves as a global grammar of resistance and possibility. Language here is not just a tool—it is a weapon, a passport, a mirror, and a dance. It speaks across borders but also deep into the local. It connects São Paulo to Dakar, Berlin to Compton, without flattening their differences.

[333] Alim, H. S., Ibrahim, A. and Pennycook, A. (2009) Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language. New York: Routledge.

Critical applied linguistics

In 'Critical Applied Linguistics[334]', Alastair Pennycook revisits and redefines a field he helped shape over three decades ago. Much has changed since his early work in the 1990s. While core injustices remain—such as racism, poverty, and inequality—the world has shifted around them. Climate change, global migration, xenophobic populism, and economic precarity now frame how language and power must be understood. Applied linguistics, Pennycook argues, can no longer ignore these forces. It must face them directly, not just with analysis, but with active commitment to change. Critical applied linguistics (CALx) is more than a method; it is a political stance. It views language not as a neutral tool but as part of the structures that produce inequality. CALx asks how language policy, education, and discourse contribute to oppression—and how they might be reimagined toward justice. The book's revised edition reflects this, offering not just updates but a rethinking of what it means to be critical today. Pennycook responds to three key questions: Do critical concerns change over time? Are past critiques tied to their historical moment? And can critical work avoid being diluted? His answer is clear: CALx must evolve. New conditions—ecological collapse, digital surveillance, racial capitalism—demand fresh approaches. Yet some concerns endure, like colonial legacies in language teaching or the persistence of Eurocentric knowledge. The field itself has also changed. Raciolinguistics, queer linguistics, decolonial theory, and posthumanist perspectives have expanded what critique can mean. Pennycook does not adopt these uncritically. Instead, he welcomes their energy while urging reflection. What matters is not just novelty but whether a theory helps confront injustice. This edition aims to be more inclusive, less rigid, and more readable. It seeks clarity without sacrificing complexity. The book also tracks how global crises intersect with language. In 1990, Pennycook wrote about inequality, child mortality, and environmental degradation. Today, child deaths are down, but economic gaps have widened. Climate change threatens those least responsible for it. Displaced populations grow as borders harden. Neoliberalism—market logic applied to everything—has intensified insecurity. Critical work must engage with these realities. Movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have brought new urgency to questions of race and gender in the field. Hashtags have become forms of political speech. Applied linguistics is being pushed to examine its own whiteness, its exclusions, and its complicities. Pennycook calls this a moment of radical hope—not blind optimism, but a commitment to imagine better futures even in crisis. Language is central to how power works in this world. From populist rhetoric to academic discourse, language shapes what can be seen, said, or silenced. CALx offers tools to resist. It reminds readers that critique is not enough. Action matters. Reflection must lead to engagement. The goal is not to master complexity for its own sake, but to use knowledge in the struggle for justice.

Politics of language

In 'Critical Applied Linguistics', Alastair Pennycook draws attention to how language is deeply tied to politics, power, and identity. He moves beyond the basic claim that 'language is political' to ask: how is it political? The focus shifts from theoretical assertions to practical questions about language policy, multilingualism, language rights, and the effects of global English. This chapter centres on the political treatment of language across societies, laying the groundwork for critical applied linguistics as a field rooted in social justice and transformation. One key issue Pennycook addresses is the global spread of English. While English is often presented as a neutral tool for global communication, it carries with it histories of colonialism

[334] Pennycook, A. (2001) Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

and present-day inequalities. Some celebrate the rise of English, suggesting it promotes efficiency and shared understanding. Others see this celebration as masking the dominance of English over other languages, especially in education and academia. Pennycook critiques this 'colonial celebratory' view, arguing that English often replaces or marginalises local languages and ways of knowing. More moderate positions exist. Liberal approaches try to balance the global use of English with the preservation of minority languages. Scholars like Crystal have argued that English can serve as a shared language for global communication, while still allowing people to maintain their native tongues. Yet this vision, while idealistic, often ignores the reality that many languages decline when English becomes dominant. Economic, educational, and institutional systems favour English, pushing other languages to the margins. Language, in this model, becomes a marker of personal identity, rather than a political tool shaped by broader forces. Pennycook also explores more critical frameworks, such as Robert Phillipson's idea of 'linguistic imperialism'. This approach sees English as a force that spreads through institutions like education, trade, and media, often displacing other languages. However, Pennycook notes that this perspective may underestimate how communities themselves adapt and resist English in creative ways. In contrast, language ecology frameworks emphasise linguistic diversity, viewing languages like species that must be protected. Yet even this approach can turn language into something static—something to preserve rather than use and transform. The most nuanced views, Pennycook argues, come from localised, situated analyses. Scholars like Canagarajah show how people in places like Sri Lanka or Iran use English in ways that reflect both global pressures and local identities. In these contexts, English is not just imposed from above but is actively negotiated and reshaped by speakers on the ground. These 'entanglements' between the global and the local reveal the complexity of language politics. It is time for a decolonial approach to language. Drawing on thinkers like Mignolo and Quijano, Pennycook shows how colonial power persists even after formal colonialism ends. This 'coloniality' shapes which languages are valued, how knowledge is produced, and who gets to speak in global forums. Decolonising language means challenging these hierarchies, supporting context-specific teaching methods, and embracing multilingual practices like translanguaging. It also means questioning the dominance of 'standard' languages and native-speaker norms. Critical applied linguistics, Pennycook insists, must not be neutral. It must engage with the real politics of language—its histories, its inequalities, and its possibilities for transformation.

Global Englishes

In 'Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows[335]', Alastair Pennycook explores how English circulates across the world—not as a singular, fixed language, but as something constantly reshaped by local cultures. His approach challenges the idea of English as a global force simply spreading from the West to everywhere else. Instead, he focuses on how English is reworked, hybridised, and reimagined in local contexts through cultural forms like Hip Hop. A vivid example comes from a nightclub in Kuala Lumpur in 2003. The Malaysian rap duo Too Phat performed using a blend of English and African American Vernacular English, referencing global Hip Hop imagery like Long Beach, Louis Vuitton, and BMWs. But they also grounded their performance in local identity. Their lyrics were not about imitating American Hip Hop—they were about making something new. They rejected the usual materialism and included references to Muslim prayer and Malaysian street food. This performance highlights the tension Pennycook explores: is English in this context a form of cultural domination, or is it a tool for

[335] Pennycook, A. (2007) Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows. Abingdon: Routledge.

resistance and reinvention? Pennycook argues that Hip Hop is more than a borrowed style. It is a space where language and identity mix. As English moves globally, it does not stay the same. It blends with local languages and styles, creating what some call 'Blinglish'—a mix of Black English and glitzy Hip Hop slang. Some see this as shallow mimicry, but others view it as a powerful form of expression for marginalised voices. This dynamic plays out beyond music. In New Caledonia, Pennycook describes a performance of capoeira—an Afro-Brazilian martial art—in the capital city. The group uses English to teach and chant, even though the island has its own complex mix of languages and cultures. English here is not just a colonial leftover. It is part of a new cultural moment where global practices meet local traditions. The question then becomes: how does English function in these encounters? Is it a symbol of Western power, or is it being reshaped into something else entirely? Pennycook critiques older models of global English—like the 'three concentric circles' idea—which divide English speakers into native, second-language, and foreign-language groups. These models treat English as something stable. But English is constantly shifting. It is spoken, sung, and reinvented by people who were never part of the so-called 'centre'. Instead of being imposed, English is often taken up creatively—blended into local styles and used in new ways. This challenges the simple view of globalisation as Westernisation. What Pennycook calls 'transcultural flows' are more than just exports from the West. They are processes of back-and-forth exchange. Hip Hop, capoeira, and English all move globally, but they are reshaped by each place they land in. Global English becomes many Englishes—each with its own rhythm, politics, and history. In this way, Pennycook shifts the conversation. English is no longer just the language of commerce or empire. It becomes a resource for cultural innovation and identity-making. By focusing on real examples of language in use, 'Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows' opens a new way of seeing language—not as a fixed system, but as a living practice that crosses borders, mixes codes, and creates new worlds.

Taking the vernacular voices seriously

In 'Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows', Alastair Pennycook argues that hip-hop deserves more attention—not because it is fashionable, but because it reveals how language and culture move across borders. Often dismissed as violent, shallow, or commercial, hip-hop is usually kept at the edge of academic respectability. Critics from both conservative and Marxist traditions have written it off. Yet Pennycook insists that these vernacular voices matter. They speak to the heart of how people shape identity, resist authority, and navigate a global world. The problem lies in how popular culture is judged. In language education, high culture has long been preferred. Shakespeare belongs in the classroom. Tupac does not. Popular culture is treated as lesser, either because it is commercial or because it lacks moral or artistic depth. But this view misses something vital. Popular culture is where people live. It reflects their daily moods, frustrations, and desires. It is not just noise it is meaning in motion. Pennycook traces this bias to the roots of applied linguistics and its ties to literature, colonialism, and scientific objectivity. English education was historically designed to civilise, to uplift. As a result, educators have resisted what feels unruly or impure. But ignoring popular culture does not make it go away. On the contrary, it allows it to grow unexamined, reinforcing the idea that the only valid voices are those speaking in the polished tones of academic or literary language. Hip-hop forces us to confront this. It is undeniably global. It travels with English but adapts everywhere it goes. In Malaysia, it fuses with Muslim prayer and local slang. In France or Japan, it adopts new rhythms, dialects, and causes. Far from being passive consumers of American culture, young people around the world use hip-hop to say what they otherwise cannot. It gives voice to the unspoken and unsettles the dominant narratives. This does not mean hip-hop is free from

critique. It can be violent or sexist. But dismissing it outright ignores the broader picture. Hip-hop is not just about selling records. It is about telling stories that matter—to those who have few other ways of being heard. In the U.S., it has long challenged racism and poverty. Globally, it speaks to disillusionment, marginalisation, and hope. Pennycook shows that English in hip-hop does not simply impose itself on other cultures. It bends and twists, absorbing new meanings. It becomes a tool—not of dominance, but of survival, even transformation. Through its rhymes and rhythms, it allows people to negotiate who they are. And it reminds us that language is not neutral. It is always part of a larger struggle over power, identity, and belonging. Taking the vernacular seriously means listening without prejudice. It means recognising that culture happens below the radar of elite institutions. In this space, voices emerge that are angry, joyful, raw, and real. They may not speak in the language of policy or poetry, but they speak—and that, Pennycook insists, is something we must hear.

2. RHETORIC

2.1. From Gorgias to Derrida

(Words of uncertainty: From sophism to deconstruction)

'The whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought'.

— George Orwell, 1984

'Speech is a powerful lord'.

— Gorgias, Encomium of Helen

'The opposition between philosophy and rhetoric is itself rhetorical'.

— Derrida, Dissemination

Lost cause of rhetoric

Rhetoric, as explored in 'The Lost Cause of Rhetoric: The Relation of Rhetoric and Geometry in Aristotle and Lacan[336]' by David Metzger, has often been misunderstood, either seen as too obvious to bother with or too obscure to matter. For some, it is an everyday tool we all use instinctively, while for others it is an abstract discipline no longer relevant. The double dismissal—both familiar and forgotten—pushes rhetoric out of serious intellectual discussion. This marginalisation comes not from a lack of value but from how philosophy has reshaped rhetoric in its own image. Rhetoric has been absorbed into philosophy. If language is perfectly precise, there is no need for rhetoric. If words can name things exactly, as Descartes believed, then rhetoric becomes mere ornamentation. It is not needed because clarity alone persuades. This renders rhetoric not just unnecessary but even deceptive. It is treated as a relic of imprecision, an echo of a time before logic and method. But if language can never fully express thought. Meaning always slips away. Derrida exemplifies this position, where rhetoric is not dismissed as false but absorbed as inevitable. It becomes something too common to notice—built into every act of speech. In this view, rhetoric is present everywhere but always insufficient, always failing to capture the truth. Both views, though opposite, lead to the same

[336] Metzger, D. (1995) The Lost Cause of Rhetoric: The Relation of Rhetoric and Geometry in Aristotle and Lacan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

outcome: rhetoric is excluded as a genuine way of knowing. Philosophy has long framed knowledge through causality and stable relations. Descartes, for example, creates a system based on the infinity of the one—where truth applies uniformly, as in geometry. Derrida, conversely, proposes an infinity of the many—where meanings are constantly displaced. But both overlook a third possibility: the infinity of the, where meaning arises from specific contexts and unique relations. This is where rhetoric lives. Descartes' famous 'I think, therefore I am' appears logical, but it is more rhetorical than it seems. Thinking is used as proof of being, but causality is redefined through relation. Existence becomes a conclusion based on a relation, not a cause. The appeal to God as the guarantor of truth is not proof but a rhetorical strategy—a way to secure meaning by invoking a higher order. The claim is not just logical, but persuasive. Descartes also openly dismisses rhetoric. In his 'Discourse on Method', he says eloquence and poetry are natural talents, not skills worth studying. For him, arranging thoughts clearly is enough. Rhetoric, with its figures and flourishes, adds nothing. This belief reflects a broader trend: rhetoric is either seen as irrelevant because truth is self-evident or useless. After all, truth is unreachable. Rhetoric does not pretend to produce certainty. It engages with uncertainty. It does not resolve contradictions but helps people navigate them. Instead of offering rigid frameworks, it opens spaces where meaning can be negotiated. In this sense, rhetoric is not a failure of logic but a different way of reasoning—one that works with ambiguity, timing, and human experience. Rhetoric is operating at the edge of what can be known. Aristotle's enthymeme—a kind of rhetorical syllogism—relies on assumptions that are shared but unstated. It works by omission. It resembles Gödel's incompleteness theorem, which shows that no system can be complete within itself. Lacan's idea of the 'object a'—the missing piece that structures desire—echoes this. Rhetoric works in the space of what is missing, not what is certain. The loss of rhetoric, then, is not just about neglect. It is about the limits of philosophical thought. When knowledge is treated as a system that must be either complete or hopeless, rhetoric disappears. But it is precisely in that space of uncertainty that rhetoric matters most. It offers a way to think about meaning, relation, and communication that does not depend on total clarity or permanent doubt. Rhetoric's exclusion is part of a long tradition of framing knowledge through opposites: presence and absence, clarity and obscurity, truth, and deception. But rhetoric does not fit neatly into those binaries. It works through time, change, and the particularity of context. It recognises that knowledge is shaped not just by what is said, but by how and when it is said. Rhetoric is not a mistake or a leftover from a pre-scientific era. It is a vital way of engaging with the world—one that challenges philosophy's assumptions and opens new ways of thinking about meaning and relation. If rhetoric thrives where certainty fails, can any act of communication ever be entirely free from persuasion?

Logos without rhetoric

In 'Logos without Rhetoric: The Arts of Language before Plato[337]', edited by Robin Reames, the origins of rhetoric are shown to be far older and more complex than the Platonic tradition suggests, rooted in pre-philosophical arts of language. Two main views shape the debate. One is the narratological account that sees rhetoric as a practical art that arose from political and legal needs, slowly evolving into theory. The other is the nominalist view, which claims rhetoric only began once it was named rhētorikē, likely by Plato in 'Gorgias'. From this angle, rhetoric is not simply a practice, but a theory that begins with classification. Only when distinguished from dialectic and sophistry did rhetoric become a field. The difference between

[337] Reames, R. (ed.) (2017) Logos without Rhetoric: The Arts of Language before Plato. Columbia University Press.

these two views reflects deeper philosophical concerns. Both perspectives recognise that eloquence existed before theory but disagree on when rhetoric became something more than skilled speech. Writing, as both a tool and a medium, played a key role in this transformation. Early rhetoricians turned spontaneous eloquence into something teachable, stable, and textual. Writing allowed speech to be preserved and examined, turning lived persuasion into repeatable form. Without the word rhētorikē there was no unified theory—only scattered practices of persuasion. Naming the art creates its conceptual space. Yet this strict naming-based approach raises problems. Ancient terms like logos complicate matters. Logos can mean reason, speech, argument, or even divine order. Reading it as rhetorical in early texts risks projecting later meanings onto earlier authors. Also, since much early literature has been lost, rhetorical practices may have existed outside what survives. Limiting the history of rhetoric to surviving texts leaves gaps. There may have been theories that were never written or that disappeared in time. The essays in this volume explore rhetorical practice before Plato. They show that manipulation of language, audience awareness, and persuasive strategies predate the naming of rhetoric. The emergence of rhetoric was gradual. It evolved alongside changes in literacy, economics, and social norms. The formal naming of rhētorikē was important, but not absolute. Persuasion, eloquence, and audience adaptation existed earlier. The early sophists practiced a kind of rhetoric shaped by their time, not just by theory. With Athens' fall, their role changed. Rhetoric moved from private instruction to public debate, from oikonomia (household management) to civic life. The final section of this collection reflects on how rhetoric became a field of study. Robin Reames and others outline key questions: How do we define rhetoric without being anachronistic? What counts as rhetorical theory versus persuasive instinct? And how should we read early texts that may have used rhetorical methods without naming them as such? These questions keep rhetorical history alive, not as a closed account but as an open inquiry. The development of rhetoric, as shown here, was not a single invention but an unfolding response to changing human needs. Speech became theory. Practice became discipline. But long before Plato gave rhetoric a name, people were already using language to move, shape, and persuade others.

Non-being and logos

In his dialogue 'Sophist', Plato presents a dense and intricate problem: how can falsehood exist if everything that is, simply is, and what is not, simply is not? Michael Wiitala explores this puzzle in his article 'The Communion of Non-Being and Logos in the Sophist Account of Falsehood[338]', focusing on a central but underexplored concept—koinōnia, or communion—between non-being and speech (logos). In section 260e3–261a2, the Eleatic Stranger tells Theaetetus that if they want to show falsehood is real, they must examine speech, opinion (doxa), and appearance (phantasia), and see how each relates to non-being. Although the dialogue analyses these elements, it does not explicitly show how speech communes with what is not. Wiitala attempts to clarify this missing step by proposing that the way logos combines elements—nouns and verbs—creates a structure that allows non-being to enter the picture. Speech does not merely mirror the structure of reality. It operates under its own rules. Beings, or ontos, relate to each other through fixed ontological relationships. Speech, on the other hand, is looser. It combines a subject and an action, often without grounding in any real connection between the two. Saying 'Theaetetus flies', for instance, brings together two real things—

[338] Wiitala, M. (2022). The Koinōnia of Non-Being and Logos in the Sophist Account of Falsehood. Areté, 36, pp.235–249. doi:https://doi.org/10.18800/arete.2022ext.013.

Theaetetus and flying—but forms a sentence that does not correspond to truth. This is only possible because speech allows combinations that reality does not. This is the basis of what Wiitala identifies as communion. Speech and non-being are not strictly opposed. Rather, speech provides a structure where non-being—what is not—can appear through misrelation. The elements in false speech exist, but their arrangement creates something untrue. Non-being is not a void but a kind of misplacement. The Stranger's point is not that speech lies by inventing fictional elements, but that it allows existing parts of the world to be assembled in ways that distort being. So, the phenomenon of falsehood, according to Wiitala's reading, arises not from speech referring to things that do not exist, but from its power to reshape existing elements into unreal relations. This reshaping is what makes logos dangerous, creative, and philosophically central. Speech does not merely describe the world; it reorganises it, and in that act, it opens the door to both truth and error. This flexible structure of speech, unlike the fixed order of beings, is what allows falsehood to occur. The communion between logos and non-being lies in that flexibility. The structure of a false statement can still follow the grammatical rules of language and contain meaningful parts, but the meaning it creates does not align with being. In this way, the 'Sophist' provides a subtle theory of how language becomes a vehicle for non-being, without collapsing into total nonsense.

Psychology of the logos

Charles P. Segal's essay 'Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos[339]' revisits one of antiquity's most enigmatic figures: Gorgias of Leontini. Living over a century and active during a formative period in Greek thought, Gorgias stands at the intersection of philosophy, rhetoric, and early psychology. Though traditionally labelled a sophist, Segal emphasises that Gorgias' work goes beyond technical argumentation. His use of logos reveals a deep awareness of how speech affects the human psyche. Rather than constructing rigid theories of being, Gorgias explored the effect of language on perception and emotion. His best-known rhetorical works, Helen and Palamedes, are not merely exercises in style; they are psychological experiments. In Helen, Gorgias defends the infamous figure by dissecting the forces that might compel a person to act—among them, logos. He presents language as something akin to enchantment. Just as drugs affect the body, words affect the soul. This comparison is not metaphorical. Gorgias treats speech as a force with real power to change how people think and feel. Segal notes that Gorgias did not rely solely on logic. He aimed at the emotional core. His rhetoric moved audiences by triggering fear, pity, anger, or desire. The speaker, in his view, was not just a persuader but a kind of artist of the soul, shaping internal states with linguistic precision. This makes his work an early example of rhetorical psychology—long before psychology became a discipline. Gorgias understood that persuasion is not about facts alone. It is about how facts are framed, coloured, and delivered. It is about tone, rhythm, metaphor, and the unconscious. Gorgias also had a clear sense of the ethical stakes. While critics like Plato accused him of relativism or deception, Segal argues that Gorgias did not reject morality. Instead, he redefined it in aesthetic terms. The speaker's responsibility was not to state objective truths but to produce effects—to harmonise speech with situation, emotion, and audience. Like poetry or tragedy, rhetoric was a pharmakon: it could heal or poison, depending on its use. What Gorgias added to rhetorical theory was the idea that persuasion is not just a matter of convincing others through reasoning. It is a visceral act that reaches into the mind and stirs it. Through logos, the speaker does not simply explain; he transforms. Segal shows that this understanding makes Gorgias an

[339] Segal, C. P. (1962) Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos. Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 66, pp. 99–155.

intellectual ancestor not only to Aristotle but to modern thinkers concerned with ideology, propaganda, and media. Gorgias' speeches were more than clever arguments. They were performances. He knew that speech could awaken, disturb, soothe, or seduce. And in recognising that, he grasped something enduring: that language, at its most powerful, does not describe the world—it reshapes it from within.

Role of logos

In her article 'Public Reasoning and the Role of Logos in Gorgias and Aristotle[340]', Veronika Konrádová examines how two foundational thinkers understood the power of speech in shaping collective decision-making. Although Gorgias and Aristotle differ in their philosophical commitments, both recognise that logos—persuasive speech—is central to public life. Their views converge around the idea that humans must navigate a world of uncertainty, and that speech, not absolute knowledge, is what guides them. Gorgias treats speech as an active force. In his 'Encomium of Helen', logos is not a tool that reflects truth, but a master that creates realities. Speech can provoke, seduce, convince, and transform. For Gorgias, humans live in a world where doxa—opinion—takes precedence over certainty. In such a world, persuasion becomes essential. Since action cannot wait for perfect knowledge, the rhetor must guide others through a world of probabilities, not truths. This perspective gives rhetoric a practical function. Gorgias argues that logos structures experience by highlighting parts of a situation. The rhetor helps people see what matters in each moment. Speech becomes a lens through which action becomes possible. He also underlines its emotional power. Language stirs the soul—eliciting fear, joy, longing. These reactions are not accidental. They are necessary for decisions to feel justified. Rhetoric is the means through which opinion becomes action. While Aristotle often critiques the sophists, he shares Gorgias's view that humans live in a world of uncertainty. In the 'Nicomachean Ethics', Aristotle describes deliberation as a process that unfolds when outcomes are unclear. He claims that humans reason practically by weighing alternatives and considering timing and appropriateness. For him, speech plays a guiding role in this uncertain terrain. In 'Rhetoric', Aristotle extends this idea to political life. Deliberative rhetoric, he says, is how communities decide what to do. It is not neutral or objective. It is shaped by the character of the speaker and the mood of the audience. Aristotle accepts that persuasion includes more than logic. Emotions matter. Trust matters. The public speaker must earn attention and foster alignment, not just present arguments. Despite their different tones—Gorgias more performative, Aristotle more systematic—both thinkers understand that logos mediates between the speaker, the listener, and the world. Public life depends on shared speech, even when that speech does not produce certainty. In both views, rhetoric is not ornamental; it is the very condition of collective decision-making. Konrádová's reading shows that Gorgias and Aristotle, each in their own way, treat logos as a response to the fragility of human knowledge. It does not deliver truth, but it enables action. And in the political world, that is what matters most.

The problem of nonbeing

Michael D. Bakaoukas, in his article 'Nonexistence: A Comparative-Historical Analysis of the Problem of Nonbeing[341]', explores a question that has haunted philosophy since its

[340] Konrádová, V. (2021) Public Reasoning and the Role of Logos in Gorgias and Aristotle, Fòns, \[online] Available at: https://doi.org/10.20318/fons.2021.5247

[341] Bakaoukas, M. D. (2021) Nonexistence: A Comparative-Historical Analysis of the Problem of Nonbeing, University of Economics, Prague.

beginning: how can something that does not exist still be spoken of, imagined, or reasoned about? The problem of nonbeing, stretching from ancient Greece to modern analytic philosophy, brings into focus the tension between thought and reality—between what is and what is not. Gorgias' treatise 'On What is Not' marks an early and radical moment in this history. Gorgias argued that nonbeing not only exists in discourse, but that it can be the object of thought. If one can think about a chimaera or a centaur, then these non-existent things, in some sense, 'are'—at least in the mind. This line of thinking, grounded in what Bakaoukas calls psychologism, suggests that nonbeing lives in imagination and memory. In Gorgias' view, mythical creatures, dreams, and lies all occupy a mental space that grants them a kind of presence, despite their absence in the real world. Plato disagreed. In the 'Sophist', he introduced a more nuanced view. Instead of treating nonbeing as an illusion or a figment of the mind, he described it as otherness—the idea that nonbeing is simply that which something else is not. This allowed for distinctions, change, and even falsehood to exist without requiring a contradiction. For Plato, nonbeing is essential for understanding diversity in the world. It is not absolute absence, but the background against which being appears. Later, Aristotle would continue this dialogue, making a careful distinction between being as actual existence and being as potential or logical form. He still held on to a realist framework but showed interest in how language and thought relate to what exists and what does not. In modern philosophy, the issue returned through the work of Brentano and Meinong. They revived Gorgias' line of reasoning, focusing on intentionality—the idea that the mind can direct itself toward things that may not exist. Meinong argued that non-existent objects, like the 'golden mountain' or 'round square', have a kind of being in thought. Russell pushed back. For him, this was a confusion of language. Using his theory of descriptions, Russell claimed that statements about nonbeing could be rephrased to avoid referring to fictional entities altogether. Saying 'the current king of France is bald' is meaningful, even if there is no such person. Quine later reframed the debate, suggesting that disputes about nonbeing are really disputes about ontology. Talking about Pegasus does not mean Pegasus exists. It just means the name 'Pegasus' has a use in language. The problem of nonbeing, then, is a tension between how humans think and how things are. Bakaoukas shows that from Gorgias to Quine, philosophers have wrestled with this paradox. Nonbeing is both impossible and unavoidable. It exists as a necessary shadow of thought—a space where meaning flickers, even when presence fails.

Meaning is in the act

In his article 'Gorgias the Sophist on Nonbeing: A Wittgensteinian Interpretation[342]', Michael Bakaoukas revisits the notorious claims of the sophist Gorgias through the lens of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. Gorgias' treatise 'On What is Not' has been read in many ways—parody, nihilism, proto-scepticism—but Bakaoukas suggests that its real depth lies in how it challenges assumptions about language, meaning, and communication. Gorgias is famous for saying that nothing exists, that even if something did exist it could not be known, and even if it were known, it could not be communicated. These declarations sound extreme, even absurd. But they reflect a serious problem in philosophy: how do words relate to things? And how can people understand each other if they cannot directly access others' inner experiences? Traditionally, scholars have interpreted 'On What is Not' in three ways. The rhetorical approach sees it as a clever speech game—a display of persuasive skill rather than a philosophical argument. The ontological approach treats Gorgias as a kind of nihilist, rejecting

[342] Bakaoukas, M. (2001) Gorgias the Sophist on Nonbeing: A Wittgensteinian Interpretation, SORITES, Issue 13, pp. 80–89.

the idea of stable being. A third approach argues that Gorgias was a serious thinker about language. Bakaoukas leans toward this third view but reframes it through Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein, especially in his later work, argued that meaning is not something that lives inside words or minds, but something that happens in shared practices. Language is not a mirror of reality. It is a tool—part of a social activity. Gorgias, says Bakaoukas, grasped this centuries earlier. He saw that speech does not passively describe the world. It acts upon the world. It moves people. It provokes. Gorgias understood that speech could never fully communicate what one feels or thinks. He said that language is inexpressible and incommunicable in its deepest sense. This aligns with Wittgenstein's insight that private language—language grounded only in internal sensation—is impossible. Meaning arises not from inner images, but from how words are used in public contexts. Moreover, Gorgias believed that language creates emotional and psychological effects. A speech does not just inform; it transforms. This idea leads toward a behavioural theory of meaning. Words do things. They cause reactions. They do not have to refer to real objects to matter. This is why, for Gorgias, even fictional or false speech still has power. Perception, too, is unstable. Gorgias argued that the same object can appear differently to different people. What one sees or hears may not match another's experience. This raises doubt about whether language can ever bridge the gap between minds. It also mirrors Wittgenstein's idea that what counts as 'seeing' or 'meaning' depends on shared criteria, not on inner certainty. In this light, Gorgias appears less as a denier of truth and more as a thinker deeply attuned to the limits of language. He forces the reader to consider that speech is not neutral or transparent. It is partial, situated, and sometimes deceptive. But it is also our only means of connection. Bakaoukas shows that Gorgias, like Wittgenstein, teaches that meaning is not in the head—it is in the act.

Powerlessness of logos

In 'Gorgias on Knowledge and the Powerlessness of Logos[343]', Josh Wilburn explores an important paradox: speech is powerful enough to shape belief, but powerless to affect knowledge. This tension lies at the heart of Gorgias' rhetorical theory, especially in his 'Encomium of Helen' and 'Defense of Palamedes', where persuasion is both a potent force and an impotent one, depending on what it seeks to change. Gorgias praises logos for its emotional and psychological force. In 'Helen', he compares speech to a drug. It can make people weep, shiver, or cheer, just through sound. Persuasive speech, he argues, can override a person's will, compelling action. Yet even as he builds this case for rhetorical power, Gorgias subtly warns us not to overestimate it. Logos may move hearts, but it cannot touch what people know through direct experience. This limitation is most clear when Gorgias distinguishes between belief (doxa) and knowledge (epistēmē). Beliefs shift. They are unstable, like clay. They can be moulded by eloquence, fear, or desire. But knowledge is firm. It is rooted in sensory experience—what one sees, hears, or remembers firsthand. Logos can suggest, insinuate, or mislead, but it cannot erase memory or produce certainty where none existed. In 'Palamedes', the speaker asks the jury whether they believe he is guilty or know it. If they only believe, then their judgment is open to persuasion. But if they know, persuasion becomes irrelevant. Gorgias, through Palamedes, stresses that rhetoric functions only in the absence of firsthand knowledge. If a juror had witnessed the crime, no speech would be needed. This argument shows the epistemic boundary that logos cannot cross. Wilburn links this to a broader epistemological view Gorgias seems to hold something close to folk empiricism. People trust what they have

[343] Wilburn, J. (2020) Gorgias on Knowledge and the Powerlessness of Logos, Wayne State University, Department of Philosophy.

experienced with their senses. They believe speakers only when they lack direct evidence. In this sense, rhetoric fills a void. Logos becomes a tool for navigating uncertainty, not for altering what is already certain. The power of logos lies in its reach over belief. That is why persuasion thrives in courts and assemblies—places where listeners must act without knowing the full truth. But its power ends where perception begins. One cannot be persuaded that fire does not burn after touching it. Logos cannot make a person 'unknow' what they have seen. Gorgias's speeches suggest he was acutely aware of this. Logos is impressive not because it can create knowledge, but because it thrives where knowledge fails. It is the master of shadows, not of light. It builds narratives where facts are absent. But it cannot replace the authority of direct experience. Wilburn's reading shows that Gorgias does not celebrate logos uncritically. He honours its power while recognising its limits. In doing so, Gorgias gives us a rhetoric that is both realistic and restrained—a tool for persuasion, not for revelation.

Rhetoric of symbolic exchange

In 'Jean Baudrillard: The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange[344]' (2010), Barbara Gogan presents Baudrillard as a thinker who deliberately resists fixed classifications—eschewing titles like philosopher or sociologist—in favour of a rhetorical mode that subverts categories through irony, paradox, and symbolic play. His writing operates across boundaries, always disrupting the rules that define disciplines. He did not simply work across fields—he undermined them. For Baudrillard, academic disciplines were less about knowledge than about control. They confined ideas, making them manageable and predictable. He called them a kind of house arrest for concepts. Even interdisciplinary studies, in his view, often serve to reinforce these boundaries rather than subvert them. Baudrillard's refusal to define himself was a rhetorical act. When asked what he did, he turned the question back on the asker. He did not lack a position—he made ambiguity his position. This act of resisting definition mirrors his deeper philosophical aim: to show how language, identity, and meaning are shaped by illusions. His rhetorical stance was less about persuasion than about disruption. He played with meaning, created uncertainty, and exposed the structures that hold perception in place. At the heart of Baudrillard's thinking is a theory of symbolic exchange. This involves a dual movement: the art of appearance and the art of disappearance. The art of appearance is about the creation of signs and meanings. It is how language and images shape the world. But for Baudrillard, these appearances are never innocent. In the modern media landscape, signs no longer point to anything real. They only point to other signs. This is what he called simulation. Meaning detaches from reality, and what remains is a loop of references that produce a sense of the real, but not reality itself. The art of disappearance counters this. It is a strategy of resistance. Instead of producing more signs, it withdraws, erases, and dismantles meaning. Baudrillard often used irony, silence, and contradiction to undermine the illusions he described. His writing style—aphoristic, fragmented, and provocative—was part of this strategy. He did not want to explain the world. He wanted to unsettle the way people see it. Baudrillard's approach to rhetoric goes beyond language. It includes his public persona, his performances, and his refusal to be fixed in place. He rejected the label of postmodernist, even though he was often called one. He worked with ideas from Saussure, Marx, and Nietzsche, but used them in ways that broke from their original contexts. His rhetorical technique involved seduction rather than argument. He used paradoxes and reversals not to solve problems but to show that the problems themselves might be illusions. To understand Baudrillard rhetorically is to see that his writing was a kind

[344] Gogan, B. (2010) 'The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange', in Jean Baudrillard: The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

of performance. He acted out the very instability he described. His theory of symbolic exchange shows how meaning is not just made but undone. He was not trying to replace false ideas with true ones. He wanted to expose the system that made truth and falsity interchangeable. His rhetoric does not offer answers—it forces a confrontation with the instability of language, reality, and knowledge. Baudrillard's rhetoric reminds us that in a world saturated by images, appearances often matter more than facts. His theory challenges readers to see how deeply language shapes perception and how easily that perception can be manipulated or erased. In a time of endless information and simulation, his work remains a powerful tool for understanding how meaning is made—and unmade. Baudrillard's art of disappearance as a rhetorical strategy aimed at resisting the saturation of meaning in a hypermediated world; rather than exposing or clarifying, disappearance becomes a form of symbolic refusal, a way to counteract the domination of signs by withdrawing from visibility and transparency, thereby restoring a sense of enigmatic presence and preserving the radical ambiguity of symbolic exchange. Disappearance is not passive. It is not about fading quietly. It is active, disruptive, and even creative. The rhetoric of disappearance does not produce counterarguments or alternative truths. It shows how truth itself can be a performance. It does not try to correct illusions but lets them play out until they consume themselves. Disappearance uses irony, withdrawal, and silence to unmake the dominance of visibility and explanation. But its power lies in how it rethinks communication. Where most theories of rhetoric aim to make things clearer, Baudrillard suggests that clarity can be the problem. In a world overwhelmed by visibility, perhaps the most radical gesture is to vanish.

Between logos and lure

In 'Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry[345]', Keith Crome explores the intersections between Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern philosophy and ancient Greek sophistry. Lyotard reclaims the sophist as a subversive figure who resists the totalising logic of philosophical discourse. Lyotard revisited Gorgias, questioned the opposition between being and non-being, and explored rhetorical strategies that challenge philosophical assumptions. In 'The Differend', Lyotard introduces a concept that becomes key to understanding his engagement with sophistry: 'the differend'. It refers to a type of conflict that cannot be resolved by appealing to a common framework. When two language games collide but do not share a rulebook, there is no neutral ground for judgment. This is not simply a linguistic problem. It cuts into ethics, politics, and ontology. Lyotard draws from the sophists. From Gorgias, he borrows the idea that language itself does not guarantee truth. From Protagoras, the belief that meaning is shaped by context and power. There is a tension between philosophical systems that seek universal agreement and the sophistic insistence on the irreducibility of difference. In this view, truth is not a stable entity to be discovered but something performed in speech, shaped by persuasion, context, and force. Philosophy, from Plato onward, has tried to suppress this realisation by casting sophistry as trickery or deception. But for Lyotard, sophistry does not undermine reason—it reveals its limits. It shows that discourse is always entangled with desire, rhetoric, and power. In 'Just Gaming', Lyotard uses sophistry to rethink judgment. 'The differend' is not just a disagreement. It is the moment when one party in a conflict cannot even phrase their wrong in the terms available. In this situation, justice cannot be achieved through consensus. It requires an awareness of the limits of discourse itself. Sophistry becomes a way of thinking that does not try to erase difference but sustains it. It recognises the impossibility of complete understanding and the violence that arises when one language game dominates another. Lyotard's use of

[345] Crome, K. (2004) Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

sophistry is deeply political. He exposes how philosophy, in its quest for truth and clarity, often excludes other voices. The sophist, in contrast, speaks from the margins, disrupting the smooth flow of reason with paradox, irony, and ambiguity. Gorgias's assertion that nothing exists, and even if it did, it could not be communicated, was not nihilism. It was a challenge to the very structure of knowledge and language. Lyotard sees in this challenge a model for thinking without closure, for resisting totalising discourses. 'The differend' reveals that injustice often occurs not through lies but through silence—when one party cannot even make their suffering intelligible. Restoring sophistry means recognising this silence and resisting the temptation to resolve it too quickly. It means honouring the dignity of speech that does not fit, of voices that do not align with dominant narratives. The task is not to reconcile all differences but to keep them open—to listen without forcing agreement. Philosophy cannot escape the problem of rhetoric, that reason cannot exist without persuasion, and that truth cannot be separated from language. Sophistry is not a failure of philosophy—it is its shadow, its remainder, its necessary other. Philosophy of what it tries to forget: that every act of speaking is also an act of positioning, of exclusion, and desire. Greek sophistry challenges modern thought to confront its own foundations, to admit the fragility of its categories, and to think with rather than against difference. In doing so, Lyotard reopens a question as old as philosophy itself: who speaks, in whose name, and with what authority?

2.2. Rhetoric of power

(The discursive state: The rhetorical structure of authority)

'Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall. It aims to perfect the imperfect; to correct the imbalance of powers through identification'.

- Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives

The Birth of Rhetoric

In Robert Wardy's 'The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato, and their Successors[346]', the figure of Gorgias stands at the uneasy threshold between philosophy and performance, between logos as truth and logos as spectacle. He is remembered not for developing a systematic school of thought, but for pushing language to its extremes—ornamented, paradoxical, and unsettling. Gorgias' contribution to rhetoric lies not just in his stylistic flair but in his radical questioning of meaning itself. He was both admired and ridiculed, and that tension still defines how rhetoric is viewed: as both powerful and untrustworthy. Gorgias' fame began with his dazzling display in Athens, where he offered to speak on any topic at a moment's notice. His exclamation, 'Give me a theme!' was not arrogance, but a challenge to traditional knowledge. What mattered was not what he said, but that he could say anything with style and force. His rhetoric was improvisational, ornamental, and persuasive, but it also posed philosophical questions. Can speech create reality? Does language shape belief more than truth does? His most infamous work, 'On What Is Not', seems absurd on its surface. Gorgias claims that nothing exists, and if something does, it cannot be known, and if it is known, it cannot be communicated. But this is not just playful nihilism. It is a deep challenge to the idea that logos can transmit truth. For Gorgias, language is never the thing itself—it is only a gesture, a shadow, a manipulation. Words do not represent reality; they evoke it. And in doing so, they can mislead, persuade, and

[346] Wardy, R. (2000) The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and their Successors. Routledge.

seduce. This was more than intellectual provocation. Gorgias offered a theory of rhetoric that embraced its artifice. Unlike Plato, who sought stable, eternal truths, Gorgias emphasised the performative moment. The spoken word is not judged by its fidelity to some objective reality but by its effect—how it moves the soul. His 'Encomium of Helen' defends Helen not through evidence but through rhetorical strategy. She may have been persuaded, deceived, or even possessed—but in each case, she is blameless. Logos, he argues, has the power of force. It acts upon the listener like a drug, altering perception and emotion. This analogy—logos as pharmakon—anticipates later thinkers who saw language as both remedy and poison. Plato's 'Gorgias' responds sharply to this vision. In it, Socrates attacks rhetoric as a counterfeit art, a kind of flattery devoid of true knowledge. He draws a firm line between persuasion and teaching, between appearance and reality. But the dialogue form Plato uses complicates this distinction. The arguments unfold through conversation, through dramatic tension, rather than straightforward exposition. Plato, in trying to dismiss Gorgias, ends up adopting some of his methods. He stages philosophy as a performance, engaging the audience not with didactic certainty but with provocation and irony. The debate between Gorgias and Plato is not easily resolved. Each critiques the other's foundation: Gorgias mocks the stability of truth, Plato distrusts the surface play of words. But they both recognise the stakes. Rhetoric is not just verbal decoration. It is about power—who gets to speak, who is believed, who shapes reality through discourse. Gorgias refuses to hide the artifice. Plato tries to ground language in a higher rationality. Yet both end up revealing that language is always caught between presence and absence, between saying and meaning. Rhetoric emerges not as a stable tradition but as a question that keeps returning. Can humans ever speak truly? Or are all speech acts forms of persuasion, endlessly shaped by context, style, and intention? Gorgias' legacy may not lie in his arguments, but in his audacity—in showing that logos, the very thing on which philosophy builds itself, might be nothing more than a beautiful illusion.

Sophistry and politics

In 'Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates[347]', Robert C. Bartlett revisits the ancient confrontation between Sophistry and Socratic inquiry, arguing that Protagoras's rhetorical approach fundamentally reshapes our understanding of political reasoning. Persuasion is as an essential component of political life and sophistic techniques remain relevant to contemporary democratic discourse and institutional critique. Political philosophy today faces a double dilemma. On one side, scholars focus on historical accuracy, carefully tracing the thought of ancient thinkers. On the other, self-declared sophists and postmodern thinkers reject metaphysical certainty altogether, offering narratives that serve political or moral agendas without claiming universal truth. These two camps—historical purists and modern sophists—seem opposed, yet both ultimately avoid the deeper question: is truth still possible? Bartlett argues that this evasion mirrors the ancient debate between Socrates and the sophists. Sophistry, far from being a modern invention, accompanied the birth of philosophy itself. Socrates did not ignore it—he confronted it directly. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates often debates the sophists, most notably Protagoras. These encounters are not accidental. Since Plato rarely shows Socrates in conversation with other philosophers, the sophists represent the clearest rivals to his intellectual mission. Their debates expose two conflicting visions of human life—one rooted in persuasion and convention, the other in reasoned inquiry and virtue. Protagoras, the most sophisticated of the sophists, presents a

[347] Bartlett, R.C. (2016) Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates. University of Chicago Press.

serious challenge to Socrates. He openly calls himself a sophist and takes pride in teaching for a fee. Unlike others, who hide behind poetry or athletics, Protagoras makes persuasion his one true art. He believes political life is a human invention—necessary, but not natural. People are not born social; they become political through training and habit. Justice and piety, for him, are tools to maintain order, not eternal truths. His teachings do not aim to reform society but to help individuals succeed within it. Socrates, by contrast, refuses to separate politics from virtue. His philosophy seeks to uncover what justice is, not just how it functions. Where Protagoras uses myth to persuade the many, Socrates demands open dialectic—questioning, dialogue, and the pursuit of truth. Their debate is not just about politics; it is about the human soul. Socrates sees philosophy as a way of life, while Protagoras sees it as a career. Protagoras' rhetoric works on multiple levels. It speaks differently to the masses, to the powerful, and to the wise. His myths appeal to popular sentiment. His speeches to elites offer advice on power and governance. But in dialogue with Socrates, he falters. He resists dialectic, avoids clear answers, and treats justice as a matter of custom. This evasion reveals the gap between rhetoric and philosophy. Socrates exposes Protagoras' unwillingness to confront the questions that matter most. The debate between Socrates and Protagoras reflects a deeper question: is politics about truth or power? Socrates argues that truth and virtue are inseparable from a just life. Protagoras sees success in political life as its own reward. Their disagreement still echoes today—in every political debate shaped by persuasion rather than principle.

Taming democracy

In 'Taming Democracy[348]', Jon Elster offers a rigorous examination of the paradoxes within democratic systems—how well-meaning institutions often produce unintended and even deleterious outcomes. Blending political theory with social science, Elster advocates for 'incentive-based design', proposing institutional reforms that temper populist excesses while preserving democratic legitimacy. In ancient Athens, democracy was loud, direct, and unruly. Citizens—sometimes over six thousand at once—gathered in the Assembly to debate and decide matters of war, peace, and justice. Every voice could be heard, at least in theory. But how could such a chaotic forum lead to wise decisions? That question haunted many Athenian thinkers, and Jon Elster's 'Taming Democracy' explores their attempts to answer it. Athenian democracy was radical in its inclusivity. Decisions were made not by a select elite, but by ordinary male citizens who voted after open deliberation. Yet this form of government posed an enormous challenge: how could the masses, driven by emotion and easily swayed by rhetoric, be guided toward sound judgment? Elster focuses on how political rhetoric—words spoken in public with the intent to persuade—could either improve or destroy the democratic process. He begins by examining how democracy's critics saw this dilemma. Early plays, political treatises, and historical dialogues warned that the demos, or people, lacked the discipline and foresight to govern. Herodotus imagined Persians debating democracy, monarchy, and oligarchy, only for democracy to be rejected as rule by ignorance. Euripides showed Theban envoys mocking Athenian openness to debate. Aristophanes, through satire, portrayed the demos as gullible and easily manipulated by flattering demagogues. Even the so-called Old Oligarch admitted democracy's success came not from virtue but from necessity—the poor ruled because Athens relied on them for war and labour. Despite these critiques, political rhetoric did not vanish. It evolved. Thucydides, in his 'History of the Peloponnesian War', recorded great speeches delivered in the Assembly, especially those of Pericles.

[348] Elster, J. (1995) Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens. Cambridge University Press.

Thucydides admired Pericles' ability to use speech not to flatter, but to lead. For him, Athens under Pericles was still democratic in name but ruled by reason through persuasion. Yet even Thucydides warned that after Pericles' death, rhetoric degenerated into populist manipulation. Plato went further. In his dialogues, he dismissed rhetoric as flattery—an art of pleasing rather than teaching. He proposed that only philosopher-kings, trained in truth, should govern. But even Plato conceded that if rhetoric could be purified and made subject to reason, it might still serve the polis. Demosthenes, a later statesman, represented another model. He believed in democracy but feared its decline. His speeches aimed to awaken the people, not with empty slogans, but with hard truths. For Demosthenes, rhetoric was not the problem; corrupted rhetoric was. The challenge was to restore it—to tame it—so it could once again serve the common good. Elster's central insight is that all these thinkers—despite their different views—understood the same basic truth: rhetoric is powerful, and democracy depends on how it is used. Taming democracy means taming language. It means finding ways to discipline public speech, to guide collective judgment, and to protect reason from passion. Ancient Athens offers no easy answers, but it shows the stakes: when speech fails, so does freedom.

Sinecure Language

The term sinecure—from Latin sine (without) and cura (care)—originally described ecclesiastical positions that required no pastoral responsibility for the care of souls. Over time, it evolved to describe any role that comes with title, salary, or prestige but demands little or no actual labour. Yet while sinecure positions appear outdated or ceremonial, they persist in modern political and institutional systems—not only as placeholders or honorary posts but as mechanisms to distribute patronage and protect the status quo. What often goes unnoticed is the distinctive 'language without care' that accompanies these roles: a rhetorical performance designed to conceal inaction behind bureaucratic fluency. The core function of a sinecure today is not labour but representation: it serves as a symbol of continuity, participation, or expertise, while contributing little to the work it ostensibly supports. Holders of sinecure positions, whether ministers without portfolio, titular heads, or dignitaries in bloated bureaucracies, develop a vocabulary that signals purpose without delivering substance. This is sinecure language—language designed not to clarify or persuade, but to appear active while being structurally passive. It includes phrases like 'ongoing dialogue', 'stakeholder engagement', 'strategic alignment', and 'capacity building', all of which give the illusion of progress while ensuring nothing measurable or disruptive takes place. This rhetoric serves a specific purpose: to stabilise institutions by neutralising dissent and avoiding decision-making. The sinecure speaker does not argue, challenge, or innovate; instead, they reiterate broad principles, uphold process, and echo consensus. Their language is marked by vague optimism, procedural hedging, and professionalised detachment. It is a discourse without consequence, an art of presence without impact. By framing inaction as deliberation, and delay as consultation, sinecure language becomes a shield for inertia, allowing individuals to retain influence while evading responsibility. Historically, sinecures were abundant in the British civil service and royal household, where positions that once required real work became ceremonial placeholders. Over time, many of these were abolished by reform statutes, but the principle remained intact. The modern minister without portfolio, for example, has no specific department but may hold a cabinet position for reasons of political balancing or symbolic inclusion. The Canadian Government House Leader is often attached to a sinecure ministry simply to meet formal requirements of cabinet membership. These arrangements reflect not only a pragmatic use of power but also a linguistic habit: to name roles not for their function but for their strategic utility. This disconnection between title and task, speech and action, produces a culture of

institutional maintenance over societal contribution. The sinecure-holder is not tasked with solving problems but with appearing relevant, sustaining the machinery of prestige, and speaking fluently in a language of low-risk diplomacy. Their discourse often includes references to heritage, continuity, or cross-sector collaboration—phrases that sound inclusive but commit to nothing. In this sense, sinecure language is not just empty—it is purposefully evasive, designed to protect the speaker from scrutiny and the institution from change. In an era that prizes visibility over utility, the sinecure endures not because it serves the public, but because it serves the system. And its language, polished but hollow, ensures that those who say nothing still sound like they are saying something.

Strategic polarisation

In 'Party Elites or Manufactured Doubt? The Informational Context of Climate Change Polarisation[349]', Eric Merkley and Dominik A. Stecula examine why American public opinion on climate change has become sharply divided—even as scientific consensus has grown stronger. They argue that partisan polarisation stems less from public access to misinformation and more from elite-driven messaging, particularly cues from political leaders. Through comprehensive analysis of media coverage, they find that contrary to the popular 'manufactured doubt' narrative, it is elite partisan signalling—especially backlash against out-party cues—that most consistently shapes scepticism. For example, public disagreement about climate change is often blamed on deep political divisions. In the United States, this divide is particularly stark. Many assume that ordinary people simply follow the cues of their political leaders. Others argue that misinformation campaigns have manipulated the public. This study asks a simple but important question: Is climate change polarisation the result of elite messaging, or has it been manufactured through deliberate doubt? The researchers focus on two major sources of influence. First, they look at party elites—politicians, media figures, and opinion leaders. These actors shape what their supporters think, especially in polarised environments. When Republican leaders express scepticism about climate change, many Republican voters adopt similar views. The second source of influence comes from industry-backed efforts to create confusion. Certain corporations and think tanks, often linked to fossil fuel interests, have long worked to cast doubt on climate science. These campaigns do not just spread falsehoods. They generate uncertainty, making people question the reliability of scientific findings altogether. The study finds that elite cues are powerful but not the whole story. Republican elites, especially since the early 2000s, have increasingly denied or downplayed climate change. Their messaging has been echoed in conservative media. This, in turn, has influenced public attitudes, creating a feedback loop. But elite influence alone does not explain the intensity of climate scepticism. That is where manufactured doubt comes in. Industry actors have invested heavily in shaping public discourse. Their strategy is not always to argue against climate change directly. Instead, they raise questions about the credibility of science. They highlight disagreement among scientists—even when that disagreement is exaggerated or irrelevant. This tactic works because it plays into the way people process information. When individuals hear that experts are uncertain or divided, they become less confident in the issue, even if the scientific consensus is strong. The result is a kind of polarisation that goes beyond politics. People are not just divided along party lines; they inhabit different informational worlds. One group sees climate change as an urgent problem. The other views it as exaggerated, politicised, or even fake. This gap is not just the product of elite messaging. It is also the outcome of a deliberate campaign to muddy

[349] Merkley, E. & Stecula, D. A. (2021) Party Elites or Manufactured Doubt? The Informational Context of Climate Change Polarization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the waters. If people are to make informed decisions, they need access to reliable information—and protection from those who profit by distorting it. In the end, the study shows that polarisation over climate change is not inevitable. It has been shaped—sometimes by leaders, sometimes by strategic manipulation.

Rhetorics of a communist

In 'The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People [350]' Xing Lu shows how the rhetorical construction of a new communist subject was fundamental to Mao's revolutionary vision and the ideological transformation it aimed to achieve. Xing Lu traces how Mao combined Marxist ideology with Chinese tradition to shape not just policies or institutions, but people themselves. Mao was not merely interested in economic reform or military victory—he wanted to transform minds and hearts. This vision drew on earlier models. Thinkers like Lenin had proposed the 'new Soviet man', a figure moulded by revolutionary values. Mao took this idea and localised it. The 'new Communist person' would be someone selfless, hardworking, and unwaveringly loyal to the Party. For Mao, transformation meant more than material progress—it required moral and ideological purification. Mao's influences included both Marx and Confucius. From Marxism, he took the idea that social conditions and class struggle shape consciousness. From Confucianism, he borrowed the belief that virtue could be cultivated. Mao's rhetorical brilliance lay in his ability to fuse these seemingly opposing traditions. He promised a modern, socialist future, but he grounded it in ideas that felt culturally familiar. Traditional Chinese thought emphasised the renren, the moral person devoted to harmony and service. Mao's version of this figure was recast in revolutionary terms. Instead of harmony, struggle; instead of family loyalty, devotion to the Party. Yet the tools of transformation—education, imitation of virtuous models, and self-discipline—remained similar. Mao believed the masses could be reshaped through what he called 'thought reform'. He launched campaigns to change how people thought, spoke, and behaved. These campaigns used the rhetoric of moral renewal but were backed by pressure and surveillance. People were urged to engage in 'criticism and self-criticism', a ritual in which they confessed ideological errors and pledged to improve. This process, Mao believed, would gradually produce new, purified individuals. In speeches and writings, Mao described this transformation as both necessary and heroic. To serve the people meant giving up selfish interests. Simplicity, sacrifice, and obedience were not just values—they were revolutionary duties. The Communist person was to be tireless, modest, and emotionally disciplined. Personal ambition was suspect; ideological loyalty was everything. Rhetorically, Mao used vivid language and moral binaries. You were either with the people or against them. You either embraced reform or resisted progress. This simplification made his message powerful, especially among the less educated. Through slogans, posters, and songs, the image of the ideal Communist took hold. The Party was portrayed not as a bureaucracy but as a moral community, and Mao its spiritual leader. greatest influence lay in his rhetorical power. His words reached across China and shaped a new kind of citizen. He used speech to define what it meant to be Chinese under socialism. Mao's public addresses and writings were filled with conviction, metaphor, and repetition. They called people to action and gave them a shared purpose. Mao's rhetorical style evolved over time. Influenced by Confucian scholars like Han Yu and modern reformers like Liang Qichao, Mao blended classical Chinese literary traditions with the simplicity of vernacular language. This allowed him to speak both to intellectuals and peasants. His language was direct but poetic,

[350] Lu, X. (2004) The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People, University of South Carolina Press.

filled with metaphors drawn from nature, war, and Chinese history. One of Mao's most famous phrases, 'A single spark can start a prairie fire', was used to rally followers during times of defeat. His metaphors gave shape to revolutionary hope and turned abstract ideology into concrete images. His speeches did not just explain ideas—they created belief. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's words became tools of control. People quoted him to prove loyalty, and disagreement was dangerous. Lu shows that Mao's rhetoric was more than persuasive—it was transformative. He redefined words like 'people', 'democracy', and 'revolution' to fit the goals of the Party. These redefinitions were not just linguistic—they changed how people understood themselves and their place in society. By focusing on Mao's use of language, Lu reveals how power is not only built through institutions or violence but also through words. Mao's rhetoric helped unify a fractured nation, but it also helped redefined it. His words built a new China—and left deep tracks that remain today.

Ontology of persuasion

Persuasion is no longer what it used to be. Once tied to political oratory or courtroom debate, it now spills over into places we do not expect—into dragonflies, hummingbirds, or even the element cobalt. In 'The New Ontology of Persuasion[351]' Marilyn M. Cooper offers a new understanding of persuasion as something ecological, grounded in encounters that change us. It is less about control and more about listening, less about mastery and more about transformation. This approach reframes persuasion as a mutual relation among all beings—human and nonhuman alike. Drawing from Timothy Morton's notion of the 'ecological thought', Cooper invites readers to consider what it means to listen to 'strange strangers'—beings radically different from us. These encounters are not metaphorical. A dragonfly landing on one's leg is not just a curious moment; it is a provocation. The world calls out in many voices. Persuasion, then, must be seen as rooted in openness. It requires attentiveness to things that do not speak our language but still speak in their way. To be persuaded is not to be conquered by a better argument. It is to be moved—sometimes without knowing why. This idea draws on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Isabelle Stengers, who suggest that genuine thought does not seek to dismantle opposing views but to remain open to new propositions. Persuasion becomes not a matter of winning but of welcoming. As Cooper puts it, this is a 'polite modification of dreams'—a gentle reshaping of the self, done not through force but through encounter. This openness, however, demands new habits of listening. First, one must believe there is something to hear. This belief, simple as it sounds, reshapes the world. If even a dragonfly carries knowledge, then everything becomes a potential interlocutor. Second, the listener must honour the individuality of the other. Each moment is unique, like the dragonfly's flight—a gathering of time, space, and matter. It is not merely a symbol; it is an event. Finally, listening requires new methods. Just as science invents instruments to let nonhumans speak—Geiger counters, spectrometers—we, too, need new tools of perception to tune in to the world. Cooper's account turns persuasion into a democratic practice, but not in the usual sense. It is democratic because it assumes that everything has something to say. It rejects the hierarchy of speaker over listener. In this view, persuasion is a shared process, not a technique. The one who listens is not passive. Being persuaded is a form of participation—a response, an adjustment, a shift in direction. This shift is not an accident; it is the core of what persuasion is. This new ontology of persuasion does not seek agreement as its final aim. Instead, it seeks resonance.

[351] Cooper, M.M. (2011) 'The New Ontology of Persuasion', JAC, 31(3-4), pp. 421–450.

Like a hummingbird's wings or a cobalt current under ice, persuasion becomes the quiet pulse of relationship, the unseen motion that links us to the world.

Rhetoric in the cyber age

Jeff Pruchnic's book, 'Rhetoric and Ethics in the Cybernetic Age[352]', explores how technological systems shape how people think, act, and communicate. Rather than seeing machines and digital media as distancing or dehumanising, Pruchnic argues they are becoming more human. Today's systems copy life. They learn, adapt, and respond. As a result, human behaviour is no longer outside these systems. It is produced within them. Traditional thought separates logos and techne. Logos is reason, speech, or logic. Techne is skill, craft, or tool use. This split shaped ethical and political ideas for centuries. But in today's world, this division breaks down. Rhetoric—once a human practice of persuasion—is now tied to technical systems. These systems operate through feedback, personalisation, and prediction. They are everywhere: in schools, healthcare, politics, and even daily speech. Cybernetics helps explain this shift. The term, revived by Norbert Wiener, comes from the Greek word for steersman. It means the study of control and communication in machines and living things. In the mid-20th century, thinkers across biology, philosophy, and mathematics met to discuss how systems self-regulate. They focused on feedback and dynamic interaction. These ideas spread beyond science into culture. Now, the logic of cybernetics drives how people interact with information and with each other. This shift changes ethics. Pruchnic calls it the transhuman condition. It is not about uploading the mind or merging with machines. Instead, it describes how people live inside systems that shape who they are. People are constantly watched, measured, and adjusted. Algorithms suggest choices before they are made. This affects how people act, think, and relate to others. Rhetoric becomes key. It is how people navigate and respond to these systems. But persuasion now happens through coded channels. Messages are tailored. They follow emotional triggers. Political ads, health apps, and learning platforms all use rhetoric built on feedback and control. Ethics cannot be fixed or absolute in this context. It becomes adaptive, interactive, and systemic. Pruchnic gives examples from everyday life. Take the red shoes from the (Product) RED campaign. They are stylish and linked to charity. Buying them feels ethical. But this is ethics turned into consumer performance. People shop to show they care. Ethics becomes something seen, tracked, and sold. This is not just empty virtue. It reflects how ethics works now—in a world where values are expressed through media and design. So, how should people respond? Not with nostalgia or rejection. Instead, by recognising that ethics and rhetoric today are shaped by systems. The challenge is to act within those systems without becoming passive. Pruchnic suggests that ethics must be rethought as something dynamic. It is not about rules or purity. It is about relationships, feedback, and adaptation in an age of control and communication. Pruchnic's work is a call to engage, not retreat. He shows how rhetoric remains a vital tool for understanding power, behaviour, and meaning in the cybernetic age. It is not just what people say—it is how they say it, how it moves, and how systems respond. In this landscape, ethics begins again.

Rhetoric of power

In 'European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power[353]', Immanuel Wallerstein examines how the language of universal values has long served as a cover for domination. Across

[352] Pruchnic, J. (2013) Rhetoric and Ethics in the Cybernetic Age: The Transhuman Condition. University of Pittsburgh Press.
[353] Wallerstein, I. (2006) European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power. New York: The New Press.

centuries, Western powers have used moral claims—human rights, democracy, civilisation—as justification for conquest and control. Behind the rhetoric lies a strategic pattern. What appears to be benevolent intervention is often a way to sustain global inequality while appearing virtuous. Wallerstein begins with the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Sepúlveda defended Spain's brutal expansion, calling indigenous peoples barbarians who needed guidance. Las Casas countered, insisting the violence had no moral basis. That 16th-century debate set the tone for modern claims of moral superiority. Whether through colonialism, war, or economic restructuring, Western powers have consistently claimed to help while taking control. Over time, the justifications evolved. As colonialism became harder to defend, a softer ideology emerged: Orientalism. Colonised societies were no longer called savage. Instead, they were described as noble but backward—civilisations in need of Western leadership. This portrayal still served the same goal. It justified the presence and rule of the West. Later, as even Orientalism lost credibility, another form took its place—scientific universalism. Scientific universalism presented inequality as objective fact. Neoliberal economic policies—free markets, deregulation, austerity—were sold not as choices, but as natural laws. This was not just a shift in policy, but a powerful rhetorical move. By claiming neutrality, these policies avoided political debate. The implication was clear: those who failed under these systems did so because of internal flaws, not because the system was unjust. Wallerstein sees this as the latest step in a long tradition of disguising control as consensus. What unites these ideological stages is their function. Each served to justify the dominance of a few nations and classes over others. They made inequality seem natural, even desirable. And they did so by claiming to be universal—to speak for all of humanity when they really served narrow interests. Wallerstein proposes a different path: a universalism that is truly universal. This means moving beyond essentialist claims about civilisation, race, or development. It means recognising the validity of multiple ways of knowing and organising society. Rather than speaking for others, it would listen. It would build a world based on reciprocity, not domination. This is not merely a theoretical task. As the world faces growing instability—economic, environmental, political—the ideological systems of the past are breaking down. There is an opening. But without new ideas, old hierarchies will return in new forms. The challenge is not just to criticise Western power, but to replace its language of domination with one of true equality. The task is urgent. If universalism continues to be used as a mask for control, global justice will remain impossible. Only by exposing these rhetorical strategies can people begin to imagine another kind of world.

Manufacturing offense

The rhetoric of power often relies on the tactic of divide and rule. By stoking religious offense and moral panic, political actors manufacture hate not to defend faith but to fragment communities. Hatred becomes a deliberate tool—engineered to polarise, distract, and dismantle the very possibility of democratic dialogue. But in 'Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy[354]', Cherian George argues that many cases of religious outrage are not spontaneous expressions of deep belief but carefully planned political strategies. These acts, whether violent protests or legal complaints, often come from actors who want to use religious offense to silence opposition, control speech, and consolidate power. They are not expressions of genuine piety, but tools for political gain. George calls this tactic 'hate spin'. It combines hate speech—open attacks on identity—with the calculated staging of offense. This approach weaponises religious and cultural sensitivities, turning them into a means of influence.

[354] George, C. (2016) Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy. MIT Press.

Hate spin is not accidental or emotional. It is coldly deliberate. It involves political leaders, clerics, and media figures who stir public sentiment to attack minorities, repress speech, or distract from broader failures. Examples from around the world show how hate spin works. In Myanmar, Buddhist leaders fuel anti-Muslim violence. In India and Pakistan, religious laws are used to target minorities. In the United States, provocative events targeting Islam are staged to prompt overreaction. The aim is to create the appearance of a culture war. Offense becomes political capital. This kind of manipulation harms democracy in two ways. First, it threatens equality by encouraging discrimination against religious or ethnic minorities. Second, it threatens liberty by pressuring governments to restrict speech, often in response to outrage that was manufactured in the first place. In this way, hate spin undermines both pillars of democracy—freedom and fairness. The legal response is complex. George explains that international human rights law, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), protects free expression but prohibits incitement to violence or discrimination. It draws a clear line: you may criticise religion but not incite harm to people. Some governments want to go further and ban offense to religion itself, but this opens the door to abuse. Laws against blasphemy, for instance, often end up punishing dissenters or minority groups. George warns against letting such laws become tools of repression. The goal should not be to protect ideas but to protect individuals. Human rights law insists that religious belief, while important, cannot override the rights of others. Respect for religion must not mean surrendering free speech. Democracies must find ways to protect citizens without enforcing religious doctrine. Hate spin thrives in divided societies and in media ecosystems driven by outrage. Social media has made it easier to spread grievance and rally support. But democracies are not powerless. George argues for 'assertive pluralism'—a stance that defends free speech while also actively resisting hate. This includes clear laws, but also social and political leadership willing to confront hate spin publicly. The lesson is clear: offense is not always real, and speech is not always free. Those who pretend to defend faith often seek to control others. Democracies must not allow the politics of offense to silence the rule of law.

2.3. Corporate rhetoric

(The office tongue: Rhetoric in the age of bureaucratic capitalism)

'Corporate culture is the control of the soul. It seeks to manage not only what employees do, but who they are'.

André Spicer, The Stupidity Paradox

Reading smoke and mirrors

Corporate annual reports are supposed to inform. Instead, many of them mislead. Packed with glowing phrases, selective data, and technical language, these reports often paint a rosier picture than reality allows. According to Peter J. Hager 'Reading Smoke and Mirrors: The Rhetoric of Corporate Annual Reports[355]', companies use rhetorical tools not just to communicate, but to control perception. The gap between what readers expect—transparent financial insight—and what they receive—a curated image—creates frustration and mistrust.

[355] Hager, P. J. (1997) Reading Smoke and Mirrors: The Rhetoric of Corporate Annual Reports. In: Grabill, J. T. and Simmons, W. M. (eds) Critical Communication Studies. New York: State University of New York Press.

Despite spending billions collectively on these reports, many corporations still miss the mark. They often assume their audience is financially fluent. But not every shareholder or analyst is fluent in accounting jargon. This disconnect produces reports that are visually polished yet rhetorically confusing. Companies aim to project confidence and stability. In doing so, they sometimes obscure uncomfortable truths behind euphemisms, vague statements, or overwhelming data sets. One section that draws scrutiny is the Letter to Shareholders. Intended as a summary and message from leadership, it often avoids specifics. Students analysing these letters frequently find excessive optimism and evasive language. This section can serve more as a PR tool than a sincere update. The Review of Operations offers more substance but also more spin. Companies emphasise achievements and growth while glossing over challenges. Students learn to spot inconsistencies between glowing narratives and hard numbers. When aligned, rhetoric and reality can reinforce each other. When they diverge, trust erodes. The Notes to Financial Statements provide essential details that often go unread. Dense and technical, this section can hide key information in plain sight. Yet, when written clearly, it strengthens the report's credibility. Students are trained to decode these notes and determine whether they clarify or obscure. Equally important is the Management Discussion and Analysis (MD\&A) section. This is where executives explain what the numbers mean. A well-crafted MD\&A gives readers context and insight. A vague or evasive one raises red flags. Here, students assess whether companies are transparent about risk, failure, and strategy—or simply offering more smoke and mirrors. Audience analysis is central. Understanding who reads these reports—and how they process information—shapes whether communication succeeds or fails. Overestimating financial literacy can alienate readers. Underestimating it can seem patronising. Striking the right balance is both an art and an ethical responsibility. Ethics plays a key role in this analysis. The line between persuasion and manipulation can be thin. Hager emphasises that rhetorical skill must be tempered by integrity. Reports that shape reality through selective language may achieve short-term goals. But they also risk long-term damage to credibility. In the end, reading a corporate report becomes more than decoding data. It becomes a lesson in language, power, and ethics. By studying these texts closely, students learn how words shape trust—and how easily that trust can be bent or broken.

Doubt as a product

In 1980, hundreds of children fell ill from Reye's syndrome. Many died. The cause was traced to aspirin, yet it took years before warning labels were added. The companies knew there was a risk, but they insisted the science was not yet clear. They delayed regulation by questioning the evidence, funding alternative studies, and casting doubt on the medical consensus. Their public relations campaigns stressed that no medication had been 'proven' to cause Reye's. This was not science—it was strategy. David Michaels argues in 'Doubt Is Their Product[356]' that this tactic is not limited to aspirin makers. It has become a standard method across industries to avoid responsibility. The method is simple: manufacture uncertainty. Rather than prove their products safe, corporations focus on discrediting the science that shows harm. Michaels points out that this approach was perfected by Big Tobacco. In a 1969 internal memo, a tobacco executive wrote, 'Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the body of fact'. This memo captures the essence of modern corporate defence. Instead of confronting evidence, industries demand more of it. They push for unattainable standards of certainty, knowing that science, by nature, rarely claims to be absolute. Through legal teams,

[356] Michaels, D. (2008) Doubt Is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health. Oxford University Press.

consultants, and think tanks, they question studies, promote their own research, and redefine the terms of debate. These efforts create the appearance of controversy, even when the science is settled. The result is delay—delay in regulation, delay in public awareness, and delay in accountability. Often industries resisted regulation, not by offering better science, but by undermining existing knowledge. They funded studies designed to obscure links between exposure and illness. They pressured agencies to ignore expert recommendations. They argued that until there was complete certainty, no action should be taken. This tactic has far-reaching consequences. Whether it is climate change, workplace safety, or food additives, the pattern is the same. Public health is sidelined in favour of profit. Regulatory agencies are weakened. Scientists are discredited. And the public, caught in the fog of competing claims, is left confused and unprotected. So, this is not a scientific debate. It is a political and economic battle fought with the tools of science, but not its principles. Doubt is not a byproduct of honest inquiry. It is, increasingly, a product deliberately made and sold. The lesson of this book is stark. When science is manipulated, the consequences are real: people stay sick, workers stay exposed, and the environment stays polluted. The question is not whether there is enough proof to act. The real question is: who benefits when society waits?

Doubt manufacture

Some industries have learnt to delay regulation not by denying facts outright but by creating confusion. In the tobacco and fossil fuel sectors, this tactic has been especially effective. Companies fund studies, support scientists with friendly views, and release polished reports. The goal is not to inform but to make people unsure. If citizens doubt the science, then governments hesitate to regulate. Yann Bramoullé and Caroline Orset present a model to explain this behaviour. In their study 'Manufacturing Doubt[357]', they show how businesses strategically mislead the public to protect their profits. The process begins with genuine scientific uncertainty. Scientists try to study the real effects of environmental harm. But while this work unfolds, firms step in to shape the public narrative. They publish reports that look scientific but are designed to mislead. These industry-sponsored studies are often hard to distinguish from legitimate research. The public, facing both kinds of information, struggles to know what is true. And because many governments are sensitive to popular opinion, they often base policy on what people believe—not on what scientists say. This creates a strange situation where both the government and industry benefit from public doubt. Firms avoid costly regulation, and leaders avoid making tough decisions. Bramoullé and Orset's model reveals that miscommunication is not always steady. When early scientific findings begin to suggest environmental harm, companies ramp up their misinformation efforts. They try hard to drown out early warnings. But when the scientific consensus becomes overwhelming, they often give up suddenly. At that point, further resistance only damages their credibility. The kind of regulation matters too. If the government enforces strict limits on emissions, firms face high compliance costs but may find fewer reasons to lie. But when the penalty is a financial tax, companies may have a stronger incentive to distort public understanding. Taxes hit profits directly, so firms fight back with greater miscommunication. Another important point is the role of research funding. Governments that want to appear effective may choose not to invest too heavily in science, fearing that stronger data might provoke backlash or force difficult reforms. On the other hand, independent agencies—like the National Science Foundation—may overcompensate and fund too much research, hoping to drown out corporate influence.

[357] Bramoullé, Y. and Orset, C. (2023) Manufacturing doubt: Industry miscommunication, scientific uncertainty, and public policy. Journal of Public Economics.

Either way, the funding decisions themselves affect the level of industry manipulation. The lesson is clear. To protect public trust and ensure sound policy, stronger safeguards are needed. Transparency in research funding, independent review of scientific claims, and thoughtful regulatory design all help reduce the space for corporate miscommunication. What this model offers is a sobering look at how knowledge is shaped not just by discovery but by power. Doubt, in this context, is not a sign of honest scepticism. It is a product—manufactured, distributed, and sold to delay action.

Distract, delay, disrupt

In their article 'Distract, delay, disrupt: examples of manufactured doubt from five industries[358]', Rebecca F. Goldberg and Laura N. Vandenberg explore how major corporations systematically manipulate scientific knowledge to delay regulation and protect profits. These efforts, often well-funded and highly strategic, are not simply disagreements over evidence but calculated campaigns to create confusion and weaken public trust in science. The authors examine five industries—tobacco, coal, sugar, agrochemicals, and fossil fuels—to show how each developed methods to distract the public, delay accountability, and disrupt scientific consensus. The tobacco industry laid the foundation. As early as the 1950s, internal documents revealed a clear strategy: create doubt, not deny facts. A 1969 memo stated plainly, 'Doubt is our product'. Tobacco companies funded research designed to counter emerging evidence about smoking's health risks. They paid scientists to challenge findings, promoted alternative explanations for disease, and portrayed concerns as unsettled science. This gave the appearance of debate where there was scientific agreement. It worked. Regulations were postponed, public confusion spread, and millions continued to smoke unaware of the real dangers. The coal industry took a similar path. Miners suffering from black lung disease faced not only corporate indifference but active obstruction. Coal companies hired doctors who downplayed symptoms and contested diagnoses. Legal teams buried medical evidence and used complex court procedures to delay compensation. The legal concept of 'true doubt'—requiring absolute proof before action—was exploited to discredit legitimate claims. The result was prolonged suffering for workers and minimal accountability for employers. In the case of sugar, the approach was more subtle but just as damaging. In the 1960s and 70s, research began linking sugar consumption to heart disease and obesity. The sugar industry responded by funding studies that shifted the blame onto dietary fat. This narrative quickly took hold in public health messaging. Government guidelines began emphasising fat reduction, while sugar escaped scrutiny. Food companies reformulated products to be 'low-fat', often replacing fats with sugar. The public followed suit, unknowingly increasing sugar intake under the impression they were eating healthier. This misdirection shaped decades of nutritional advice and contributed to growing rates of obesity and metabolic disorders. Syngenta, the agrochemical giant, went a step further. When biologist Tyrone Hayes published studies linking the herbicide atrazine to reproductive harm in frogs, the company did not just dispute the findings—they went after the scientist himself. Internal documents revealed efforts to monitor Hayes, pressure his university, and plant critical stories in the media. Meanwhile, Syngenta flooded the scientific literature with studies designed to contradict or obscure Hayes's results. The campaign was not about resolving a debate. It was about silencing dissent and preserving a product's market viability. Climate

[358] Goldberg, R.F. and Vandenberg, L.N. (2019). Distract, delay, disrupt: examples of manufactured doubt from five industries. Reviews on Environmental Health, [online] 34(4), pp.349–363. doi:https://doi.org/10.1515/reveh-2019-0004.

change denial, perhaps the most widespread example, was led in part by the George C. Marshall Institute. Founded during the Cold War, the Institute later turned its attention to environmental science. Borrowing tactics from the tobacco playbook, its members—many of whom had ties to industry—challenged the growing consensus on global warming. They emphasised scientific uncertainty, cherry-picked data, and lobbied journalists to give 'both sides' equal weight. This created a false balance in the media, leading many to believe that the science was unsettled. Their influence extended into politics, slowing action on climate policies and framing environmental regulation as a threat to economic freedom. These cases show a consistent pattern. Industry actors manufacture doubt to shield themselves from accountability. They fund biased research, discredit independent experts, manipulate public opinion, and obstruct legal processes. The goal is not to find truth but to create enough confusion to stall action. This tactic undermines scientific integrity and endangers public health and safety.

Non-authentic advocacy

More brands are stepping into the spotlight, making statements on political and social issues. Some do this because it aligns with who they are. Others do it to stay relevant or attract attention. The question that matters now is: are these brands truly invested in change, or are they just performing? In 'Brand Activism: Authentic Advocacy or Woke Washing?[359]' Jessica Vredenburg and her colleagues explore this growing phenomenon in their study. They show how brand activism can be powerful when it fits with a company's values and practices. But when it is disconnected—when the talk does not match the walk—it becomes what many now call woke washing. That is, using social causes as marketing tools without making real changes behind the scenes. Consumers are watching closely. They expect companies to stand for something, but they also expect consistency. The Gillette campaign against toxic masculinity sparked debate. Some applauded it, while others pointed out the company's pricing double standards. Nike's campaign with Colin Kaepernick drew both praise and protest. Ben & Jerry's, on the other hand, was widely trusted because its activism was not new—it reflected decades of similar actions. The authors offer a helpful way to think about this. They create a framework with four categories. First is authentic activism, where brands match strong messaging with real, supportive practices. Second is silent activism, where the company does the work but does not make much noise about it. Then there is no activism—companies that avoid social issues altogether. Finally, there is woke washing—loud claims without action. Misalignment can backfire. When people feel manipulated, they turn away. Empty slogans and flashy ads are not enough. What matters is whether a brand takes meaningful action. This includes internal policies, long-term commitments, and actual resources devoted to causes. Interestingly, the authors argue that a bit of mismatch—what they call moderate incongruence—can be useful. A brand might not have a long history with a certain cause but can still take a stand and grow into that space. What is dangerous is jumping in too quickly or superficially. The Pepsi protest ad with Kendall Jenner is a well-known example of getting it wrong. So, what can brands do? They can set clear goals. Instead of saying 'we care', they can say 'we're investing this much in this cause'. Independent certifications can also help. Groups like B Corp give consumers confidence that the brand is not just talking. In the end, consumers are becoming more aware, more sceptical, and more demanding. Brands cannot afford to fake it. If they want to lead with purpose, they need to show up with substance. Otherwise, their messages will ring hollow, and trust will be lost.

[359] Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A. and Kemper, J.A. (2020) Brand Activism: Authentic Advocacy or Woke Washing? Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 39(4), pp.444–460.

Corporate advocacy

Corporate advocacy is a form of strategic communication used by companies to influence how they are seen by the public, policy-makers, and even their own employees. It combines elements of advertising, public relations, and lobbying. But more than selling products, it sells values, defends reputations, and promotes positions on public issues. In 'Corporate Advocacy: Rhetoric in the Information Age[360]' Judith D. Hoover brings together different perspectives to explore how companies use advocacy to shape debates and protect their interests. There are several key types of corporate advocacy. One is economic justification, where a business defends its financial actions—like explaining layoffs or tax strategies. Another is corporate storytelling, which relies on narratives to make a company seem human, ethical, and community-minded. A third type focuses on managing public issues and policy risks. And the last is crisis management, where advocacy becomes a tool to protect reputations during scandals or accidents. Advocacy works both inside and outside the company. Internally, it shapes employee loyalty and workplace culture. Externally, it helps companies position themselves as responsible actors. For example, when Nike backed Colin Kaepernick, it was not just a marketing decision. It was a form of advocacy that sparked a global conversation and reinforced the company's brand identity. Argumentation theory, especially Kenneth Burke's dramatistic model, offers a useful way to understand how advocacy works. Every act of corporate advocacy involves a scene (the political or cultural context), an agent (the person or group speaking), an act (the message itself), agency (the medium used), and a purpose (what the company wants to achieve). This model helps show that advocacy is not just about facts—it is about the motives and values behind them. Burke's categories also show how advocacy can be driven by different worldviews. Some companies focus on economic survival (materialism), others on tools and strategies (pragmatism), and some on ideals or personalities (idealism). Sometimes, advocacy is even wrapped in moral or spiritual language, turning profit-making into a kind of social mission. Corporate advocacy is not without risk. When done poorly or dishonestly, it backfires. If a company claims to care about the environment but pollutes rivers, the public will notice. And once trust is broken, it is hard to rebuild. Advocacy can also draw backlash, especially when it touches on divisive topics or appears opportunistic. In the end, advocacy is not just a tool for communication—it is a tool for power. Its effectiveness depends on how well it reflects a company's real actions and values. Used responsibly, it can shape public conversations and drive positive change. Used cynically, it becomes another way to manipulate opinion and protect corporate interests.

Shared value creation

In 'Corporate Innovation Strategies: Corporate Social Responsibility and Shared Value Creation[361]' by Nacer Gasmi argues that modern corporate innovation is no longer solely driven by profit. It is about building strategies that include social and environmental concerns. Businesses are no longer judged solely on financial performance. Consumers expect companies to take responsibility for their broader impact. The idea that companies should care for society is not new, but it has become more urgent. Modern CSR combines ethics, sustainability, and strategy. The focus is on reducing harm while creating shared value for both business and society. Since the mid-20th century, corporations have helped drive global growth. They have created jobs and contributed to public services through taxes. But this growth has often come

[360] Hoover, J.D. (ed.) (1997) Corporate Advocacy: Rhetoric in the Information Age. Westport: Praeger.
[361] Gasmi, N. (2021) Corporate Innovation Strategies: Corporate Social Responsibility and Shared Value Creation. Springer.

with side effects—pollution, layoffs, and inequality. Many companies have now begun shifting from reactive CSR—responding to laws and crises—to more proactive approaches. They aim to align their core values with their impact on society. Lars Rebien Sorensen, former CEO of Novo Nordisk, stated that social and environmental problems eventually become financial problems. His point reflects how social responsibility now ties into long-term success. The concept of shared value (CSV), developed by Porter and Kramer, links business success to solving social problems. This is not charity. It is about recognising that business and society depend on each other. Companies that address social needs can uncover new markets, reduce risk, and build trust. Today, even small businesses are feeling this pressure. They are expected to measure their impact and show how they benefit society beyond their bottom line. Corporate innovation now means adapting to these expectations. Companies develop strategies that reduce negative externalities and create public benefits. They adopt new business models. Some repair past damage. Others innovate through new products. Some build entirely new businesses focused on sustainability. Impact investing helps measure success not just in profits, but in social value. This shift demands clearer metrics and stronger partnerships between businesses and other institutions. Two views shape how businesses approach CSR. One sees profit as the only goal, leaving social issues to governments. The other, more modern view sees CSR as a smart business strategy. Companies that ignore social problems may face public backlash, legal pressure, or lose customer trust. Those that act early often gain an advantage. CSR strategies are not only about doing good—they are about avoiding harm. Activist pressure, public opinion, and media exposure push companies to be more transparent. Regulatory bodies set hard rules, but businesses are also shaped by soft power: values, trust, and expectations. Companies that lead on CSR often help shape the rules themselves. Today, large businesses have influence equal to some governments. That power comes with responsibility. When states fail to lead, corporations may step in, as seen after the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. CSR becomes not just a legal duty but a moral and strategic one. It is a way for businesses to stay relevant, trusted, and resilient in a changing world.

Corporate dialogue

In 'Corporate Rhetoric Participates in Public Dialogue: A Solution to the Public/Private Conundrum[362]' Josh Boyd presents corporate rhetoric as a potential remedy to the longstanding tension between private interests and public discourse. Corporate rhetoric is often criticised as a private force interfering with public dialogue. But this view oversimplifies how organisations operate and communicate in modern society. The idea that public and private discourse are clearly separate no longer holds. Instead, corporations have become part of the public conversation, shaping and being shaped by societal concerns. Critics argued that corporate language undermines democratic exchange by promoting self-interest over the common good. They suggest that the public sphere has been reduced to a competition of private agendas. But this perspective assumes too much. It ignores the way many public institutions rely on private influence, just as corporations engage in public-facing communication. The boundaries between sectors are far more entangled. Companies speak to more than shareholders. They must address employees, consumers, regulators, and communities. Their rhetoric is not always profit-driven. It often reflects social responsibility, environmental goals, or labour ethics. These efforts show

[362] Boyd, J. (2001). Corporate rhetoric participates in public dialogue: A solution to the public/private conundrum. The Southern Communication Journal, 66(4), pp.279–292. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940109373207.

that businesses are not only economic actors but social ones too. Their communication reaches into public life, shaping how issues are discussed and framed. Scholars such as Cheney point out that organisational rhetoric differs from individual speech. Corporations manage many voices. They navigate competing interests while projecting unity. The collective 'we' in corporate language hides the complexity inside. This challenges traditional rhetorical criticism, which is more comfortable analysing personal speech. But institutions speak too—and their voices matter. Looking at examples helps make this clearer. Utility companies are private businesses but serve public needs. The CIA is a public agency that operates in secrecy. Amtrak is a government-owned company that runs on a business model. Even airlines can become public concerns during crises. These cases show that public and private categories often break down in practice. A key example is the military-industrial complex. Companies like Boeing and Lockheed Martin are private, but they work almost entirely for the state. They influence military policy and supply arms. Their rhetoric is not just commercial—it is deeply political. These firms do not fit neatly into either box. They operate in the space between. When critics reject corporate speech outright, they risk missing how companies influence policy and respond to public demands. Not all corporate rhetoric is manipulative. Some of it engages meaningfully with democratic issues. The task is to judge whether corporate messages help or harm public discourse. Are they transparent? Do they allow debate? Do they serve the public interest? Corporations do respond to public pressure. Media attention, activism, and consumer behaviour all shape how they communicate. Commitments to ethical sourcing or climate action may be strategic—but they are still responses. If corporate rhetoric were purely private, it would not react to these pressures. The challenge is to move beyond outdated labels. Instead of asking whether rhetoric is public or private, ask what it does. Does it inform? Does it hide? Does it enable or silence? These questions lead to better analysis and greater accountability. Corporate rhetoric is part of public life. It should not be dismissed. It should be studied, questioned, and held to ethical standards. In doing so, it can be made to serve the public good. Corporate speech can bridge the gap between private interest and public discourse—but in practice, it often reshapes dialogue on corporate terms, leaving the public to follow rather than lead. Today's public dialogue unfolds entirely within corporate frameworks, as the very spaces once thought to be public—plazas, streets, media platforms, and digital forums—are owned, curated, and monetised by corporations. In such a landscape, there is no dialogue outside corporate dialogue, only echoes within its branded walls.

Corporate social responsibility

'Corporate Social Responsibility in Europe: Rhetoric and Realities[363]', edited by Regine Barth, follows how CSR, has become a central topic in discussions about sustainability across Europe. Unlike the largely voluntary approach common in Anglo-American contexts, CSR in Europe often blends voluntary actions with regulatory expectations. Businesses are expected to contribute not only to economic performance but also to environmental protection and social equity. In this context, CSR serves both as a business strategy and as a tool for broader governance. European companies operate within a complex system of legal rules, consumer expectations, and political frameworks. CSR emerges at the intersection of these forces. It covers a wide range of practices, from non-financial reporting to ethical labour standards and community engagement. However, the most important question remains whether CSR actions result in measurable improvements in sustainability or remain superficial gestures designed to polish a company's image. The research presented in Regine Barth's collection focuses on

[363] Barth, R. (ed.) (2007) Corporate Social Responsibility in Europe: Rhetoric and Realities.

evaluating CSR's effectiveness across various sectors. It finds that CSR is widespread in principle but uneven in practice. Many companies declare commitments to sustainability, but their ability to translate these into real change differs. For example, banks and oil companies report using many CSR tools, but the depth of their implementation varies. Sectors such as fisheries and small manufacturers tend to do less, due to limited resources and lower public scrutiny. Several factors determine the actual impact of CSR. One is visibility—issues like carbon emissions and workplace diversity are easier to measure, making progress more tangible. In contrast, efforts like anti-corruption are harder to track because success often means the absence of wrongdoing, not visible change. Another factor is alignment with business strategy. Companies are more likely to act when CSR supports their core interests, such as sustainable sourcing in seafood industries or green energy in the oil sector. Corporate control over the issues also matters. It is easier for firms to reduce internal emissions than to change supplier behaviour or customer habits. Likewise, external pressure from civil society, investors, or regulators plays a role. The more public attention an issue receives, the more likely companies are to address it seriously. In areas with weak advocacy or unclear metrics, CSR efforts tend to be weaker or more symbolic. The study also highlights the importance of the broader regulatory environment. In tightly regulated areas, CSR often reinforces existing laws rather than creating new practices. But in loosely governed areas, voluntary corporate action can fill important gaps. This suggests that CSR works best when it complements, rather than substitutes for, public policy. Despite its promise, CSR remains uneven in practice. Some companies make real progress; others engage in greenwashing. The challenge for both researchers and policymakers is to distinguish between surface-level commitments and meaningful change. Governments can help by setting clearer rules, offering incentives, and improving transparency standards. CSR is not just a communication tool. It is a mechanism through which businesses participate in solving societal problems. But for it to work, it must be judged by results, not just rhetoric.

'Wordwashing' culture

In 'Greenwashing Culture[364]', Toby Miller exposes how language has become a tool for disguising environmental harm under a veil of ecological concern. At the heart of the issue lies the appropriation of sustainability rhetoric by corporations and cultural institutions. Words like 'green', 'sustainable', or 'eco-friendly' no longer guarantee meaningful action. Instead, they often serve as public relations smokescreens, distracting from ongoing environmental destruction. This use of language to mislead and manipulate—what might be called 'wordwashing'—is central to the broader pattern of greenwashing. Greenwashing operates within the framework of capitalist expansion. It is not a mistake or a marginal practice; it is a calculated response to public concern. Companies do not need to change their behaviour if they can change their story. A rebranding campaign costs less than reconfiguring a supply chain. By telling a new story—one in which a polluting company becomes a green champion—corporations retain power, evade regulation, and sustain profit. Miller points to BP's rebranding as 'Beyond Petroleum' as a perfect example. While the slogan suggested radical change, the company's core business remained oil extraction. Renewable investments were token gestures. The story shifted; the substance did not. This manipulation extends far beyond corporate logos. Cultural institutions, including museums, universities, and festivals, participate in this rhetorical laundering. By accepting sponsorships from oil companies or mining firms, these institutions help whitewash reputations. The public sees a museum exhibit on climate change sponsored by a fossil fuel

[364] Reference: Miller, T. (2018) Greenwashing Culture. London: Routledge.

giant and interprets it as evidence of progress. But what really happens is the transformation of critique into spectacle. The arts, which should challenge dominant narratives, become tools for distraction. Culture itself is repurposed to shield the status quo. Greenwashing is effective because it works through language and image. It creates the appearance of change without requiring transformation. It promises responsibility while continuing exploitation. Its greatest success is not in misleading regulators, but in shaping public feeling. The audience wants to believe. People are tired of doom and eager for solutions. Greenwashing provides the comfort of action without its cost. It turns climate concern into consumer preference. Yet Miller makes clear that this is not just about deceptive branding. It reveals deeper ideological commitments. Modern economies are built on the assumption of endless growth and extraction. Greenwashing allows that myth to persist. If capitalism can speak the language of ecology, it can pretend to be compatible with planetary limits. But the reality is otherwise. No amount of green vocabulary will reverse climate breakdown if the material foundations remain untouched. To counter this, a cultural shift is needed. Environmentalism cannot be reduced to logos and slogans. It must challenge the structures that produce environmental harm. This includes questioning the role of culture itself. Museums, artists, academics, and media professionals must choose whether to confront the illusions they have helped construct or continue to offer distractions. Miller's call is not only for policy reform but for a transformation of values. Real sustainability will come when language and action align—when words do not hide destruction but describe genuine repair. Until then, greenwashing will remain a symptom of a system unwilling to change. Greenwashing, like every form of earlier whitewashing, is just another chapter in a long history of "wordwashing," where carefully chosen words replace the actions they pretend to describe.

3. WRITING

3.1. Written language

(The visible shape of thought: Writing and its civilising force)

'Writing is a technology that restructures thought'.

Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy

'The invention of writing was the beginning of history'.

Jean Bottéro, Mesopotamia

From speech to writing

In 'The Tongues of Men and Speech[365]', J. R. Firth explores the social and contextual nature of language, emphasising that meaning arises not from isolated words but from their function within specific cultural and communicative situations. Language has always been more than a tool. Across different ages and cultures, it has been seen as divine, creative, and sometimes magical. In ancient civilisations, language carried the weight of religion, myth, and power. Egyptian priests believed that naming something brought it into being. Thoth, their god of writing, ruled over both order and chaos through speech. The Hindus saw Vak, or speech, as

[365] Firth, J. R. (1937) The Tongues of Men and Speech. London: Oxford University Press.

a force of the universe—speech was creation itself, not just its description. In Greece, Plato and Aristotle asked if words had natural ties to meaning or if those links were arbitrary. Aristotle's method of analysing speech—breaking it into functions and parts—shaped how Europe would study language for centuries. The Romans picked up this thread. Quintilian, a Roman educator, treated language as a social act shaped by usage, not fixed rules. For him, grammar followed people, not the other way around. Religious traditions gave language a sacred quality. Jewish scholars explored Hebrew in relation to its Semitic relatives, seeking meaning in its patterns. Christian efforts to spread doctrine led missionaries to learn and transcribe dozens of unwritten languages. Their work, often aimed at biblical translation, became an early form of comparative linguistics. Later, language study shifted into scientific mode. In the modern era, with tools like behaviourism and neurology, scholars began to treat speech as something physical, a matter of brain and body. Reflex theory reduced language to a series of responses. But even as this view took hold, older beliefs about the mystical or persuasive power of words remained alive. Advertising, propaganda, even courtroom language—each still relies on the ancient faith that words shape the world. Firth believed speech must be understood not as a list of words or rules, but as something humans do. Speech is action. It comes from the body. People do not just speak to express thoughts—they speak to exist among others, to move through the world. The voice is breath shaped into meaning, passed between people in a loop of listening and responding. From infancy, humans build language through interaction. A baby does not mimic—it experiments, listens, repeats. Speech becomes muscle memory. The ear adjusts, the mouth learns. And every person, no matter how fluent in one language, still lives among many—languages of reading, writing, hearing, and speaking. Each tongue adds a layer to the Babel of modern identity. Firth rejected simple origin stories. Speech did not come from mimicry or exclamation. It grew from the body's need to act, the group's need to coordinate, and the brain's need to interpret. To study language is to study behaviour. It is not a code but a habit. It exists in time, in movement, in response. Language is not still. It is something people do together, again. The transition from speech to writing was slow because speech is lived, shared, and embodied—while writing is removed, abstract, and solitary. With the invention of writing, language ceased to be something fleeting between bodies and became something fixed in space. This shift was accelerated by printing, which turned language into mass-replicable text, further detaching it from its origins in voice and presence. While language is a collective act, writing is often an individual one. This is the paradox of writing: it preserves speech by separating it from speakers. A technology of permanence, writing unites minds across time while isolating them in the moment. Ultimately writing is a technology of alienation.

History of writing

In 'A History of Writing[366]', Steven Roger Fischer traces the development of writing from its earliest forms to its potential future as a global system. He begins with the birth of writing around 3700 BC, when images evolved into signs that could represent not only objects but also sounds. This shift, led by the Sumerians through the rebus principle, allowed pictograms to stand for spoken syllables and words. It marked a key transformation—writing no longer simply illustrated the world but began to express human speech. From the beginning, writing was shaped by the needs and beliefs of societies. In Mesopotamia, cuneiform developed from simple drawings into a wedge-based script used on clay tablets. It started as a tool for accounting but expanded to include literature, law, and religion. In Egypt, hieroglyphs were seen as divine gifts, used for sacred and official inscriptions. Over time, they were adapted into quicker cursive

[366] Fischer, S. R. (2001) A History of Writing. London: Reaktion Books.

scripts for everyday use. Despite these different paths, both systems were deeply connected to speech and ritual, and both became central to the organisation of their respective civilisations. Fischer shows that writing systems can be complete even when they do not record every detail of speech. Scripts like rongorongo or the early Chinese divination texts may seem limited, but within their own cultural frameworks, they were sufficient for preserving knowledge, memory, and power. What matters is not how much a script captures, but how it functions in society. The spread of writing across regions—from the Iranian plateau to the Indus Valley—shows how flexible these systems were. Some remain undeciphered, yet they reveal a shared belief in writing as a tool of authority and administration. As societies grew more complex, writing kept pace, adapting to trade, bureaucracy, and belief. In the second half of the book, Fischer turns to the present and future. Writing systems, he argues, survive not because of their efficiency but due to the political, social, and cultural power of those who use them. The Roman alphabet, for instance, has become dominant not because it is better than others, but because it is linked to empires, global commerce, and now, digital technology. Computers were built on Latin-script infrastructure, and this has pushed many cultures to adopt or adapt to it. The case of Azerbaijan illustrates how politics shape writing. Over the 20th century, its people shifted from Arabic to Latin, then to Cyrillic, and now back to Latin—each change reflecting shifts in power and identity. Such changes are rarely about ease of use; they reflect deeper struggles over culture, modernity, and belonging. Fischer predicts a future where fewer scripts remain. A global 'world script', based on the Latin alphabet, may become standard. While this might seem like a loss, he suggests it could also preserve languages by giving them access to digital tools and global communication. Writing is more than code; it is memory, identity, and the visible shape of thought. Even if technologies shift toward speech or automation, the act of writing will remain one of the central expressions of human culture.

From pen to press to pixel

From sacred scrolls to digital code, writing has evolved from gesture to machine, shaping not only how humans communicate—but who they become. When the word left the tongue and took to paper, it found power—but lost its breath. Writing is not merely the recording of spoken language; it is a distinct system with its own history, rules, and consequences. While people often refer to 'written language' as a singular phenomenon, they typically mean printed language—that is, typography. In modern contexts, this term increasingly includes digital writing as well. Yet these forms are not interchangeable. The shift from handwriting to print, and from print to screen, marks more than a change in technology—it signals a transformation in how language is experienced, understood, and socially distributed. Handwriting is intimate and variable. Each pen stroke reflects a body behind the words, a rhythm shaped by the writer’s hand and breath. Before printing, manuscripts were laboriously copied and illuminated, each text bearing traces of individual presence. Monks read aloud as they wrote, embedding voice into script. Manuscript culture was slow, embodied, and often communal. Its margins were spaces for commentary, not fixed barriers. In contrast, typography introduced uniformity and speed. With Gutenberg’s movable type, words lost their tactile uniqueness and became reproducible units. Printed pages stripped writing of gesture and replaced vocal rhythm with visual order. This shift created new habits of silence, solitude, and linear attention—what Marshall McLuhan described as the birth of the 'typographic man'. Typography turned writing into a mechanical force. It encouraged classification, fixity, and specialisation. Laws, science, and national literature could be standardised. Individual authors emerged, as did the idea of a stable, authoritative text. Unlike the fluidity of handwriting or speech, print demanded consistency. The reader became isolated, a silent interpreter of uniform marks, detached from

the speaker or writer's body. This detachment helped foster abstract thought, national consciousness, and bureaucratic organisation. Yet it also introduced a new rigidity. Print did not merely preserve meaning; it froze it. Errors became permanent. Interpretation narrowed. The dominance of typographic language reshaped not only knowledge but also the very structure of human identity. With digital writing, the terrain shifts again. Screens blur the line between writer and reader, between publishing and conversation. Text becomes clickable, searchable, and ephemeral. Algorithms rank it, while platforms fragment and filter it. Emojis and hashtags restore some elements of gesture and tone, but digital text is not a return to orality—it is a hybrid. Digital writing extends the logic of print into new territories of surveillance, speed, and simulation. Yet it retains the same function: to encode human thought, transmit authority, and shape perception. When we speak of written language today, we often overlook this history. We speak of writing as if it were neutral, but it is anything but. Writing systems—from cuneiform to cursive to code—are technologies. They organise thought, but also power. The transition from oral to written, from handwritten to printed, and now to digital writing, reveals how language technologies mediate access to knowledge, shape institutions, and define human relationships. McLuhan warned that each medium reconfigures not only what people say, but how they think and feel. Literacy may empower, but it also excludes. Typographic systems served empires and nation-states as much as poets and scholars. Today's digital scripts serve global corporations as well as communities. Writing is thus never just words on a surface—it is a way of seeing, a way of ordering the world. It determines who is heard and how long their voice lasts. Whether carved, printed, or coded, writing does not merely reflect thought—it produces it.

How writing rewrote the human self

When man carved words into silence, he lost his voice but gained a mirror. Writing did not merely give humans a tool—it gave them a new identity. Typography fractured the unity of the senses, replacing the echo of shared speech with silent lines of print. Before Gutenberg, people lived in an audible-tactile world where architecture, sculpture, and spoken language formed a resonant cultural whole. Reading aloud was communal, embodying rhythm, memory, and physical presence. But with print came interiority, isolation, and abstraction. Reading became silent and passive, voices faded, and sculpture and public art lost their function as focal points of speech. Typographic man was born—visually biased, linearly trained, and psychologically fragmented. This transformation remade the very idea of selfhood. Once positioned at the centre of creation, man was soon decentralised—displaced by Copernicus in space, Darwin in time, and Freud in consciousness. The notion of a continuous, rational world collapsed under the weight of relativity and quantum theory. The alphabet had once helped create fictional Euclidean space; print hardened it into dogma. In turn, modern physics shattered it, replacing cause with configuration and rendering visual homogeneity obsolete. Writing also restructured power and knowledge. The book became not only a repository of ideas but also a force of cultural hegemony. Its linear form encouraged classification, compartmentalisation, and specialism, making disconnected thinking appear rational. This segregation of disciplines, as Whittaker showed, led science to describe rather than explain, mimicking Newton's technique of detached prediction. Print made science possible, but also dulled sensibility, detaching the mind from lived experience. Scholars like Leibnitz feared this 'indefinite multitude of authors', foreseeing that the flood of books would stifle discovery, dilute knowledge, and turn authorship into vanity. The printed book replaced conversation with monologue, oral reasoning with visual proof. What began as a tool to illuminate understanding ended by obscuring its roots. A line of ink became the world's new spine. The transformation

from oral to typographic culture was not simply a change in medium—it was a reprogramming of human consciousness. Man did not just use writing; writing remade man. Marshall McLuhan's 'The Gutenberg Galaxy' reveals how writing, and especially the invention of movable type, profoundly reshaped human experience by shifting perception from an oral-tactile world to a visual-linear one. Men, once immersed in tribal soundscapes where language resonated communally, became isolated individuals governed by silent reading, fragmented vision, and sequential logic. Typography did not just store knowledge—it reprogrammed the senses, privileging sight over touch and hearing. This reorganisation altered not only thought but identity: the oral man, defined by participation, became the literate man, defined by detachment. The alphabet abstracted sound into visible characters; print standardised these characters into repeatable units; and the printed book imposed uniform time, space, and individuality. As this visual bias intensified, so did hierarchical structures—fixed points of view, private property, nationalism, and the division of knowledge into specialised disciplines. Masculinity itself was recoded: from ritual performance to rational control, from embodied memory to disembodied abstraction. McLuhan traces how the medieval singing booth became the silent carrel, how the oral teacher became the solitary author, and how the tribal elder became the professional specialist. Writing, especially typography, did not simply transmit culture—it dislocated the male self from communal being and installed him as sovereign observer. Yet with the rise of electronic media, McLuhan suggests, this visual regime is collapsing. The retribalisation of the global village threatens the stability print once provided. The question is not whether man will return to myth, but whether he can recognise how deeply technology has already rewritten him.

Writing meaningfully

In 'A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing[367]', Alec King explores how language shapes thought, identity, and power. His central claim is that language instruction should do more than teach grammar or composition; it should encourage students to think clearly and critically. Writing, for King, is not just a means of expression—it is a process of thought itself. He warns that without meaningful engagement, writing becomes empty, reduced to formulaic exercises that stifle curiosity rather than develop it. Teachers must create an environment where students are free to question, argue, and explore. In doing so, language becomes a tool for reflection, not just a skill to be mastered. King also investigates how words gain meaning. Language is not a transparent medium; it operates through associations. A word like 'melons' means something only because it has been linked, repeatedly, to a particular object and set of experiences. This connection is never fixed. Meaning varies depending on personal context, cultural background, and emotional memory. For King, this makes communication inherently fragile. It relies on a shared set of associations that may not always hold. When discussing abstract ideas like justice or freedom, people may use the same words while imagining entirely different things. Yet language still functions, because within a cultural group, enough overlap exists to create understanding. Still, King stresses that recognising the instability of meaning is vital for anyone hoping to write or speak clearly. The book also explores metaphor and simile—not as literary flourishes, but as essential tools of thought. They allow people to grasp what is unfamiliar by comparing it to what is known. A metaphor like 'time is a river' condenses emotion and concept into a single image. It communicates movement, loss, and continuity all at once. For King, metaphors are not optional decorations; they are part of how humans understand the world. This is especially true in literature and philosophy, where metaphors

[367] King, A. (1980) A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing. London: Oxford University Press.

often carry more weight than definitions. Even science, despite its pursuit of precision, occasionally leans on metaphor when direct description fails. King argues that mastering metaphor is part of mastering thought. Alongside King's analysis, Steven Roger Fischer's 'A History of Reading' provides a broader historical context for literacy and the written word. He shows how books, once rare and revered objects, became instruments of mass communication. From Emerson's idea of sacred reading to the rise of the printing press, Fischer traces how reading changed from an elite ritual to a universal activity. This shift helped fuel social movements, revolutions, and the growth of industrial society. Yet with the rise of mass media, concerns emerged about the quality of reading. Was it possible to read too much, too fast, or without thought? Critics like Alexander Pope feared that access to books did not guarantee wisdom. The spread of reading, like language itself, could be liberating or misleading, depending on how it was used. Language, then, is never neutral. It shapes perception, guides action and distributes power. To write well is to think well. To read carefully is to resist manipulation. As both King and Fischer show, the control of language is not merely academic—it is political and personal, essential to freedom and meaning in modern life.

Silent triumph of the written word

As speech gave way to writing, memory moved from the living body to the silent page. In seeking to preserve knowledge, people began to lose touch with the immediacy and depth of lived experience. Marshall McLuhan's investigation into the transition from oral to literate and ultimately to typographic culture unveils a fundamental transformation in human consciousness. Before writing, people lived embedded within collective, multisensory experience—speech was not simply a tool for transmitting information but a dynamic, embodied act that bound communities together. Oral cultures thrived on immediacy, presence, and cyclical notions of time. Narrative was not something consumed in solitude but performed and shared, woven into the rhythms of daily life. With the invention of writing, however, language was detached from voice, breath, and body. It was externalised, abstracted, and preserved—no longer ephemeral, but permanent, visual, and private. McLuhan argues that writing created a new kind of human: the individual. The act of reading silently, in isolation, promoted a sense of personal interiority distinct from the group. As he observes, the portability of the book helped fuel the cult of individualism, allowing people to construct identity apart from tribe, clan, or immediate social ties. This transformation was deepened by the printing press, which not only standardised language but mechanised thought. Reading became faster and more linear; the voice was quieted, and the visual sense took dominance over the auditory and tactile. What had once been a collective and multi-sensory act was now streamlined into a solitary, visual experience. This change did not come without loss. For McLuhan, the shift to writing represented a narrowing of the human sensorium. The alphabet reduced the complex interplay of sound, gesture, emotion, and social context into uniform marks on a page. Writing turned the living world into a system of signs to be decoded, rather than inhabited. Print further accelerated this process, making reading more efficient but also more detached. It made possible the rise of modern institutions—schools, bureaucracies, markets—but at the cost of immediacy and ritual. Knowledge became something stored rather than remembered, consulted rather than lived. McLuhan's view echoes ancient warnings. In 'Phaedrus', Plato predicted that writing would give only the semblance of wisdom. People would forget how to remember, mistaking the accumulation of texts for the possession of knowledge. Writing, McLuhan suggests, fulfils this prophecy. It amplifies information but weakens memory. It creates systems of education and science while simultaneously dulling the intuitive, sacred, and emotional dimensions of life. The literate person may know more but feels less. This flattening of experience is the

paradox at the heart of literacy. Writing offers permanence, structure, and progress, but it also strips experience of its fullness. It turns the sacred into the secular, the communal into the individual, the dynamic into the static. In the literate world, physiological acts lose their ritual weight—they become routine rather than sacrament. The more people read, the less they embody what they know. Writing transforms not only how humans think but what they are able to feel. As McLuhan concludes, the great power of writing is its ability to reshape human consciousness. But in doing so, it reduces a world once thick with presence into a world of visual sequence—flattened, ordered, and profoundly alone.

How the human brain learnt to read

In 'Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain[368]' (2007), Maryanne Wolf explores how the invention of writing and, later, printing fundamentally transformed the human brain, reshaping not only how people think but who they are. Unlike spoken language, which the brain acquires naturally, reading is a cultural invention that must be painstakingly learnt and physically rewires the brain's circuitry. Wolf traces how early writing systems began to train the brain to process abstract symbols visually, while the advent of the printing press amplified this transformation, accelerating the spread of literacy and fostering new forms of abstract, linear, and analytical thought. Writing externalised memory, deepened introspection, and enabled people to think across time and space, but it also introduced cognitive trade-offs—favouring visual processing over oral and embodied knowledge. In charting the brain's adaptation to reading, Wolf reveals how literacy did not just add a skill but altered the very architecture of human consciousness. 'Proust and the Squid' tells the story of how the human brain learnt to read, a journey that spans thousands of years and reshapes what it means to think. Humans were not born to read; there is no genetic blueprint for literacy. Unlike spoken language, which develops naturally, reading is an invention that requires the brain to repurpose existing neural circuits. This adaptation, while unnatural, became one of the most significant turning points in human evolution, transforming how people understand time, memory, and the world itself. Wolf traces this development from the ancient Sumerians, who used clay tablets to train young scribes, to the invention of the Greek alphabet, and onward to the complexities of the modern reading brain. Each stage in this history shows how literacy changed not only how people communicated but how they thought. Early scripts like Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs required enormous effort to master. They demanded sharp memory, pattern recognition, and visual processing. Learning to read these scripts was difficult, but it trained the brain to think in new ways. The alphabet, especially the Greek version, marked a major shift. By representing speech with a small number of letters, it reduced the burden on memory and allowed for more abstract reasoning. Wolf draws a connection between this simplified writing system and the emergence of philosophical thinking in ancient Greece. As reading became more accessible, the mind was freed to engage in deeper, more reflective thought. The phonetic alphabet fundamentally reshapes the brain's development and cognitive processes by reducing spoken language into a small, consistent set of visual symbols representing individual sounds. This simplification, seen most clearly in the Greek alphabet, allows for faster literacy acquisition and fosters abstract thinking by externalising and analysing the basic units of speech. Neurological studies reveal that readers of alphabetic scripts primarily activate regions in the left hemisphere of the brain, while readers of character-based systems like Chinese engage more distributed networks across both hemispheres. This

[368] Wolf, M. (2007) Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain. New York: HarperCollins.

divergence influences how language, memory, and meaning are processed. The phonetic alphabet encourages linear, sequential reasoning and supports analytical and philosophical thought by minimising the cognitive load of memorisation. Yet, as Maryanne Wolf emphasises, it is not inherently superior to other writing systems. Cultures with non-phonetic scripts have also produced rich intellectual traditions. The phonetic alphabet does not make the brain better, but it shapes it differently—emphasising abstraction, efficiency, and visual bias at the cost of sensory complexity. In this sense, the alphabet helped lay the groundwork for modern consciousness. Marcel Proust compared reading to a kind of telepathy—an act where the mind travels into another's thoughts. For Wolf, this image captures the magic of literacy: reading is not just about symbols on a page, but about entering other perspectives and ideas. The brain, when reading deeply, creates a dialogue between past and present, self, and other. This mental flexibility is one of literacy's great gifts, allowing people to imagine, reason, and empathise. But Wolf also warns that this gift is fragile. The rise of digital media brings new challenges. Unlike the sustained focus required by books, screens encourage skimming, multitasking, and distraction. Studies suggest that deep reading, which builds critical thinking and emotional insight, may be declining. The same brain that once learnt to read can now be rewired again—this time in ways that may not support careful thought. If digital reading becomes the norm, what happens to the brain's capacity for reflection? To preserve the full power of literacy, people must continue to teach and practice deep reading. The brain's ability to change is both its strength and its vulnerability. How that flexibility is used will shape the future of reading—and of thinking itself. Maryanne Wolf explores how the invention of writing and, later, printing fundamentally transformed the human brain, reshaping not only how people think but who they are. Unlike spoken language, which the brain acquires naturally, reading is a cultural invention that must be painstakingly learnt and physically rewires the brain's circuitry. Wolf traces how early writing systems began to train the brain to process abstract symbols visually, while the advent of the printing press amplified this transformation, accelerating the spread of literacy and fostering new forms of abstract, linear, and analytical thought. Writing externalised memory, deepened introspection, and enabled people to think across time and space, but it also introduced cognitive trade-offs—favouring visual processing over oral and embodied knowledge. In charting the brain's adaptation to reading, Wolf reveals how literacy did not just add a skill but altered the very architecture of human consciousness.

Reading fiction and reading minds

A 2016 study 'Reading fiction and reading minds: The role of simulation in the default network[369] ' by Tamir, Bricker, Dodell-Feder, and Mitchell investigates how reading fiction activates specific regions of the brain associated with social cognition. Using functional neuroimaging, the researchers demonstrate that fiction engages the brain's default network, particularly areas linked to simulating other people's thoughts and feelings. Reading fiction engages the brain in ways that differ profoundly from reading non-fiction, especially through its unique ability to simulate minds, emotions, and complex social worlds. This study demonstrates that fiction reading activates the brain's 'default network', a system of interconnected regions responsible for imagining hypothetical events, past experiences, and, crucially, the thoughts and feelings of others. Unlike non-fiction, which typically presents facts, explanations, or arguments, fiction demands that readers enter the mental lives of characters,

[369] Tamir, D. I., Bricker, A. B., Dodell-Feder, D., & Mitchell, J. P. (2016). Reading fiction and reading minds: The role of simulation in the default network. Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 11(2), 215–224. https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsv114

interpret motivations, and construct rich, imagined social environments. This process recruits the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) subnetwork of the default system—specifically tied to 'theory of mind' (ToM), or the ability to understand others' beliefs and intentions. When participants read social and abstract fiction passages, this dmPFC subnetwork was strongly activated. Those who read more fiction also performed better on ToM tasks, such as moral reasoning involving intent. Mediation analysis confirmed that neural activity in this subnetwork explained the link between fiction reading and social cognition, while vivid but non-social scene simulations did not. In other words, the value of fiction lies not simply in its narrative or descriptive richness, but in its unique capacity to train people to think about people. Importantly, the effects are not replicated by non-fiction. In fact, exposure to non-fiction was not associated with improved ToM and in some cases correlated with poorer social cognitive performance. This suggests that not all reading is equal. The imaginative and emotional demands of literary fiction—where readers must infer inner lives and feel alongside characters—offer a kind of practice for social understanding that non-fiction does not. Thus, fiction reading is not merely entertainment or a less serious cousin of writing; it is a vital exercise for the social mind. It builds empathy not by instruction, but by simulation. Writing creates distance, documentation, and permanence; fiction reading creates connection, imagination, and flexible understanding. In this sense, fictional speech, writing, and reading form a separate cognitive domain from factual language use. Reading fiction is not a passive act—it is a participatory simulation that reshapes how people perceive and relate to others. Rather than being interchangeable with non-fiction, fiction demands a different kind of reader—one who imagines rather than evaluates, inhabits rather than records. The human brain appears to reward this difference: those who engage with fiction are training themselves in the art of social thought. In a world increasingly saturated with information but starved for understanding, fiction remains a critical resource not just for culture, but for cognition itself. The reading mind becomes not just informed but restructured—built to navigate imagined worlds and other minds, a cognitive architecture distinct from that shaped by non-fiction or oral traditions.

Shakespeare's 'Linguistic Internet'

'Shakespeare turns English into the world's linguistic internet a platform in which all cultures ideas and worldviews can meet and crossbreed. Shakespeare is transforming English into this extremely flexible beautiful memorable language which allows everyone to learn English well. It's a linguistic internet. For the first time all cultures are able to meet together in within a English language and communicate with each other. But this exchange is mediated through Anglo-American civilization which is at its heart utilitarian, sceptical and empirical. So when you embrace English, when you experience English you're also experiencing British culture history and philosophy'.

- Jiang Xueqin, 'Shakespeare's Language of Empire'

In a lecture[370] to his Beijing students, Jiang Xueqin coined the term 'linguistic internet'[371] to describe how Shakespeare's innovations in syntax and diction transformed English into a global platform. This network, unlike oral or literary traditions of the past, enabled the cross-

[370] Predictive History (2025). Civilization #51: Shakespeare's Language of Empire. [online] YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qms7trnKwqQ [Accessed 5 Aug. 2025].

[371] "Linguistic internet" describes English as a cultural network, not to be confused with "Internet linguistics," a field pioneered by David Crystal.

pollination of cultures and ideas within an imperial frame. Shakespeare's language, deliberately mediocre in message, served not to transmit truth but to build infrastructure—a flexible, memorably musical medium ready to host the empire's values. English thus became not a message but a medium: the channel itself, designed for scalability. Its content mattered less than its capacity to carry—and absorb—others. Xueqin asked, 'How did Shakespeare father the British empire?' William Shakespeare did not set out to forge an empire. He wrote for a raucous public in the theatres of Elizabethan England—spaces filled with noise, drink, and laughter. Yet his language would become the foundation of British imperial identity. Through innovations in diction, syntax, and imagery, Shakespeare elevated English from a regional vernacular into a global medium—what Jiang Xueqin calls a 'linguistic internet'. This network allowed diverse cultures, ideologies, and peoples to communicate across vast distances, not merely exchanging words but cross-breeding worldviews, all within the linguistic framework of Anglo-American civilisation. Shakespeare's true genius lay not in political vision, but in psychological and rhetorical imagination. He did not theorise imperial power; he dramatised human frailty, ambition, and desire. His characters—Hamlet, Lear, Othello—are not allegories or types but complex individuals, each shaped by inner conflict and emotional depth. He observed people closely, and without elite prejudice. That human insight granted his works a universal appeal, ensuring their continued relevance and adaptability across continents and centuries. His impact on the English language was unprecedented. Shakespeare coined or transformed thousands of words and expressions, stretching the bounds of syntax and metaphor. A single term like 'dagger' became, in his hands, a vehicle for new psychological meanings—suggesting suspicion, fear, or betrayal. He manipulated grammar freely, turning nouns into verbs, and adjectives into adverbs. His diction created an expansive vocabulary capable of capturing new experiences, objects, and abstract ideas arising from global exploration and imperial ambition. Moreover, his poetic form—especially the use of iambic pentameter—rendered his lines memorable and musical, making complex ideas accessible even to illiterate audiences. Phrases such as 'a sea of troubles' or 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' embedded themselves into collective memory, shaping emotional perception through rhythm and image. Shakespeare thus offered not just stories, but a way of seeing and feeling—a language that touched both the mind and the senses. Jiang Xueqin's term 'Linguistic Internet' captures this phenomenon. English, through Shakespeare, became a medium rather than a message—valuable not for its content, which could be deliberately banal or ambivalent, but for its function as a flexible framework for global communication. Shakespeare's language in 'Julius Caesar' is not about the plot, but about creating enduring typologies—models of speech, character, and action so potent they reshape perception and behaviour. Like a secular Bible, his words implant mental images that outlive their context. The story is secondary; the form becomes the message. Through rhetorical rhythm and metaphor, Shakespeare transforms language into a neurological architecture of belief. The language itself became the infrastructure of empire: scalable, portable, ideologically neutral on the surface, yet quietly encoded with British pragmatism, empiricism, and utilitarianism. Shakespeare's plays were deeply ambivalent about power. Yet his works were later deployed as evidence of British superiority, taught in colonial schools, and held up as proof of civilisation. The irony is stark: a playwright who never left England became the cultural passport of empire. Shakespeare did not build the empire. But he gave it its written language. 'The pen is the tongue of the mind', wrote Cervantes—but unlike the tongue, which speaks only to the person before it, the pen speaks to generations. It carries intention across time, reaching a non-finite number of readers long after the voice has faded.

How to Write a Language?

When Saints Cyril and Methodius developed the language now called Old Church Slavonic in the 9th century, they were not merely translating Scripture—they were inventing an entirely new way for language to function within a civilization. Their work created not just a liturgical language but a kind of 'linguistic internet'—a platform for transregional communication, cultural exchange, and imperial integration. Rather than representing a local people, tradition, or folklore, this language was deliberately detached from any specific Slavic ethnos. Its value did not lie in its content but in its architecture: scalable, flexible, and designed to carry a civilization's ideological payload. Old Church Slavonic arose in direct defiance of the so-called 'trilingual heresy', the belief that only Hebrew, Greek, and Latin were valid for praising God. At the time, this was not just a theological position—it was a cultural and political gatekeeping mechanism, limiting sacred legitimacy to the languages of existing empires. In this context, Cyril and Methodius' choice to use the vernacular of Slavic converts was revolutionary. They created not just a translation but an entirely new linguistic infrastructure—a liturgical, grammatical, and written system capable of uniting disparate Slavic dialects into one communicative network. Unlike oral traditions or elite literary canons, Old Church Slavonic was engineered as a platform. Its syntax and diction were consciously composed to be comprehensible, replicable, and easily adaptable across Slavic-speaking regions. This made it ideal for missionary work and political expansion. It offered a musical and memorably structured medium that lacked the idiosyncrasies and irregularities of everyday speech. In doing so, it achieved what few languages before had: becoming a shared matrix of meaning among people who had no shared ethnicity, folklore, or identity. It was not a poetic or expressive tongue, but a conduit—a vessel for transmitting imperial ideology and spiritual authority. By design, the language was neutral, even mediocre. It had no allegiance to local customs or myths and carried no native emotional resonance. In this way, it functioned more like code than poetry—unemotional but highly functional. It allowed for the absorption of content from different sources without disrupting the system's structural integrity. Just as today's internet protocols enable the transmission of everything from cat videos to political propaganda, Old Church Slavonic enabled the movement of both scripture and imperial policy across borders. It was scalable before scalability had a name. In this linguistic system, language was no longer the message. Language was the medium—a framework optimized for expansion, integration, and endurance. The content it carried—prayers, creeds, laws—could change or evolve. What mattered was that it enabled cultural transmission on an imperial scale. This shift anticipates modern ideas about networks, where communication systems are judged not by what they say but by what they allow others to say. Old Church Slavonic was not merely a language born of missionary necessity. It was the prototype of a linguistic operating system. It transformed local dialects into nodes within a greater cultural grid, connecting communities that had never before shared a common vocabulary or conceptual world. It was not a voice of any one people, but a multilingual skeleton key, opening doors across the Slavic world. Cyril and Methodius, in rejecting trilingualism, did not merely argue for liturgical plurality—they redefined what language itself could be: not the carrier of one people's truth, but the platform upon which many truths could be programmed. In this way, the invention of Old Church Slavonic was less about writing 'in language' than writing 'a language'—an artificial, scalable, ideologically neutral system built not to express the past, but to host the future. Language is never unaligned; to write a language is to prefigure 'a people'. In shaping its structure, values, and voice, you do not merely describe reality—you create a world and mould its inhabitants in your own image, as gods once did.

3.2. Art of writing

(The scripted mind: Silent power of the written word)

'To write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking'.

Jacques Derrida, Acts of Literature

The lost art of writing

Anne Trubek's 'The History and Uncertain Future of Handwriting[372]' (2016) and Philip Hensher's 'The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting[373]' (2012) offer complementary portraits of handwriting's cultural trajectory—one viewing its decline as inevitable, the other lamenting its loss as an erosion of humanity. Trubek outlines a convincing argument that handwriting, once a cornerstone of literacy and character, is now rapidly becoming obsolete. She charts its historical path from ancient cuneiform and hieroglyphics through Roman capitals and medieval scripts to the American penmanship drills of the 19th and 20th centuries, where good handwriting was a moral virtue, tied to discipline and industriousness. But Trubek argues this kind of hand no longer serves its social function. Typing, texting, scanning, and voice commands have made the pen a relic. The skill of writing by hand has receded to the margins of education and culture, used more for sentimental value than necessity. Hensher, on the other hand, resists the obituary. In 'The Missing Ink', he illustrates—sometimes literally—why handwriting still matters. His tone is anecdotal, scattered, and witty, but beneath it lies a serious question: what do we lose when we stop writing by hand? Hensher's answer is clear—handwriting is not just a tool for communication but an extension of personality, memory, and presence. He recounts the value of leaving handwritten notes, lists, corrections, and condolences—things digital writing struggles to replicate with the same intimacy or emotional texture. A typed condolence letter, for example, may appear impersonal or even offensive in moments of grief. Hensher's example of Gordon Brown's controversial handwritten letter to a bereaved parent, imperfect spelling and all, underscores the point: sometimes only handwriting will do. Together, the two authors show that what we often call 'written language' today is typographic language. When most people write, they mean typing—on laptops, tablets, or phones—or increasingly, speaking to digital assistants. The shift from handwriting to typography, and now to digital input, has profound implications not just for literacy but for cognition and culture. Trubek demonstrates that modern life no longer requires a handwritten script for practical purposes, but Hensher insists that the script preserves a kind of authenticity that printed and digital forms cannot replicate. What is striking in both books is the recognition that handwriting is not static. Scripts evolve. Hensher's survey of historical styles, from copperplate and Sütterlin to Marion Richardson's child-friendly script, shows that handwriting has always been shaped by ideology, pedagogy, and aesthetics. Even the notion that handwriting reflects moral character—once widely accepted—is now treated with scepticism, both in Trubek's critique of graphology and in Hensher's humorous mock-beliefs. Yet both authors note that the physical act of writing, especially by hand, affects how people think. Whether it is scrawling thoughts in the margins of a book or sketching out a speech on a scrap of paper, handwriting supports reflection, improvisation, and memory in ways that typing may

[372] Trubek, A. (2016) The History and Uncertain Future of Handwriting. New York: Bloomsbury.
[373] Hensher, P. (2012) The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting (And Why It Still Matters). London: Macmillan.

not. Digital writing, while efficient and versatile, tends to strip language of materiality—reducing letters to pixels, flattening identity to font. In the long arc of history, handwriting was never a mass phenomenon. For most of its existence, it belonged to the few—to scribes, monks, clerks, and artists—not the many. Even as literacy spread, handwriting remained more an art than a utility, closer in spirit to calligraphy, painting, and ornament than to the rapid-fire efficiency of modern communication. Its golden age as a widespread practice was brief and anomalous, a flicker between the labour of scribes and the automation of print and pixels. Handwriting was less a technology of mass messaging than a personal gesture, an expressive trace of the hand behind the thought. In the age of digital immediacy, its decline is not surprising—but the loss is still cultural, intimate, and deeply human.

Zen in the art of writing

In 'Zen in the Art of Writing[374]', Ray Bradbury reflects on the deep relationship between writing and living. For him, writing is not just a craft but a way to survive the chaos of the world. It is how he keeps himself grounded, connected, and alive. He describes writing as something necessary—an act he must do every day to keep from falling apart. Skipping even a single day leaves him uneasy, as if he is losing touch with himself and the world. But when he writes, even briefly, he feels restored. Bradbury's early experience as a nine-year-old boy helped shape this philosophy. After being mocked for his love of comic books, he abandoned them, only to return a month later out of love for Buck Rogers. This moment of self-rebellion marked the beginning of a lifelong lesson: that writing and passion are inseparable. That child's defiance, the refusal to surrender what he loved, became the foundation of his creative life. It was a small but defining act of survival. He argues that writing helps process the emotional burdens of life—loss, fear, tragedy. While writing may not erase suffering, it gives shape to pain and offers a way through it. He speaks of friends and family affected by illness, grief, and hardship. Writing, in these moments, becomes a kind of resistance. It does not solve life's problems, but it helps one endure them. In Bradbury's view, writing is both an act of memory and defiance—a way to keep moving forward despite the wounds. What drives great writing, according to Bradbury, is not technique or theory but passion. He uses words like 'zest' and 'gusto' to describe the emotional fuel behind good storytelling. Writers should not write to impress or follow trends. Instead, they should write from love or anger, from joy or frustration. He points to writers and artists like Dickens, Melville, and Mozart—creators whose work was filled with energy and feeling. That is what makes it last. For Bradbury, writing must come from emotional truth. Whether the subject is a trolley ride or a pair of tennis shoes, the writer's connection to the material is what gives it power. He once drafted a short story out of anger after seeing a magazine exploit Puerto Rican people in a photo shoot. That rage turned into a narrative, and the story connected with readers. It was born not from strategy but from urgency. He urges writers to forget about success, forget about the market, and just write. The process itself is the reward. To write honestly and regularly is to train, to become fluent in one's own voice. He compares this to a kind of athletic practice, where repetition builds strength and confidence. Writing, like life, is about showing up again, no matter the odds.

Writing down your soul

In 'Writing Down Your Soul[375]', Janet Conner explores how writing can become a path to deep inner connection. She argues that while prayer, meditation, or even talking with others

[374] Bradbury, R. (1990) Zen in the Art of Writing. Santa Barbara: Joshua Odell Editions.
[375] Conner, J. (2008) Writing Down Your Soul. San Francisco: Conari Press.

can offer insight, writing holds a special kind of power. It does not just help organise thoughts—it creates a space where the conscious and unconscious mind meet. Writing becomes a dialogue between parts of the self that are often kept separate in daily life. What makes this form of writing so different is its honesty. It is not about grammar or form. It is about showing up on the page, unfiltered. When people write freely—without censoring or editing—they access something more raw and real. Conner describes this as tapping into the voice beneath the surface, the voice that knows what is really going on. That voice often holds pain, but also truth and clarity. Writing becomes a mirror that does not lie. This process also has measurable health benefits. Conner cites psychologist James Pennebaker, who found that expressive writing, especially about trauma or emotion, can lead to better immune function, reduced blood pressure, and improved mental clarity. In his studies, people who wrote about their feelings for just 15 minutes a day experienced long-term improvements in well-being. Some even saw positive changes in their careers and relationships. This suggests that writing can act as both therapy and transformation. On a neurological level, writing seems to help the brain balance emotion and reason. Candace Pert's research in neuroscience revealed that emotions live in every cell of the body, carried by chemical messengers called peptides. When emotions are blocked—by denial, repression, or silence—those messengers get stuck. This can lead to feeling disconnected, depressed, or even ill. Writing releases that blockage. It opens the channel. Words become movement. The act of writing lets the truth flow. Writing can also shift the brain's activity. As emotional memories rise to the surface, the logical mind is still at work shaping sentences and following thought patterns. This creates what researchers call brain-wave coherence. The brain begins to integrate emotion and logic. That is when new understanding can happen. People might find unexpected connections, see patterns in their behaviour, or come to peace with something that had once haunted them. Conner believes that when you write in this open, fearless way, you are not alone. You connect with something larger—some call it God, others call it spirit, or higher self. The name does not matter. What matters is the experience of being heard. The page listens. And in that act of listening, healing begins. Over time, writing becomes more than a tool. It becomes a companion. Writing this way is not about creating art. It is about being real. It is about finding a way through pain or confusion to some place of peace. When people give themselves permission to write with honesty, they often find answers they did not know they had. They begin to trust their inner voice.

Reader come home

In 'Reader Come Home[376]', Maryanne Wolf explores the changing nature of reading and how it reshapes the human brain. Unlike speech, reading is not hardwired into our biology. It is a cultural invention, and every brain that learns to read must reconfigure itself to do so. This transformation has been central to how humans think, reflect, and connect with others. But today, as more reading shifts from page to screen, we face a new moment of transition—one that raises urgent questions about attention, depth, and the future of literacy. Wolf argues that the shift from print to digital media is not just a matter of format. It changes the way we read, the speed of our engagement, and the circuits our brains develop. Digital reading, especially when done quickly across devices, favours scanning, clicking, and moving on. In contrast, reading in print encourages sustained attention, inference, and empathy. As digital habits become dominant, the kind of deep reading that fosters critical thinking may become harder to sustain. This is not only about adults. Children growing up in digital environments are learning to read in ways quite different from previous generations. Their brains are adapting to speed,

[376] Wolf, M. (2018) Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World. New York: Harper.

distraction, and fragmented attention. This affects not just what they read but how they think. Wolf worries that the neural pathways once strengthened through deep reading—those that support reflection, memory, and emotional insight—may be weakening in this new environment. If we understand how different reading mediums affect the brain, we can make informed choices. Her hope is to cultivate what she calls a 'biliterate brain'—a mind that can move between screen and page, speed, and depth, without losing the cognitive and emotional richness of traditional reading. She draws on neuroscience, education, and literature to show how reading works in the brain. When we read deeply, multiple brain regions work in harmony: visual areas recognise letters; language centres decode and interpret; memory and emotion shape meaning. This complex system allows for a kind of inner dialogue that connects us with others and ourselves. But it must be exercised. Without practice, the brain's deep-reading circuits can weaken, just like muscles that go unused. Wolf also draws attention to a growing cultural impatience with long-form reading. The rise of the phrase 'too long; didn't read' reflects more than a joke—it signals a shift in how people value time, focus, and comprehension. In a world flooded with information, we risk trading understanding for efficiency. Her message is both a warning and an invitation. Deep reading is not just a habit—it is a way of being in the world. It shapes how we reason, empathise, and imagine. Deep reading strengthens attention, fosters empathy, and builds critical thought. But these are not automatic outcomes—they require time, practice, and stillness. In a world increasingly driven by speed and distraction, this kind of reading is at risk.

Therapeutic potential of writing

Writing is not simply about telling stories or perfecting grammar. It can be a powerful means of personal discovery and emotional healing. In her book 'The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing[377]', Gillie Bolton argues that writing allows people to explore difficult emotions in a safe and private space, offering an alternative to spoken therapy and a chance to confront what might otherwise remain unspoken. Writing for oneself, not for publication or praise, becomes a space of freedom where fears, memories, and hopes can emerge without judgment or interruption. It gives form to confusion and helps people see their experiences from new angles, often bringing relief or understanding that talking alone cannot offer. Unlike everyday conversation, writing stays. It does not vanish into the air. It can be returned to, revised, or even discarded. This permanence lets people revisit thoughts when they are ready. Writing slows things down. It helps shape feelings into something manageable. When someone writes honestly, without fear of being corrected or misunderstood, they create a space in which they can reflect and heal. For many, it becomes a companion—a way to track change, notice patterns, and express what is too tangled to say aloud. There is no need to be a 'good' writer to benefit. The value of therapeutic writing lies in its honesty, not its literary merit. Spelling, structure, and form do not matter. What matters is expression. Whether it takes the form of poetry, personal narrative, letters, or even fiction, writing allows people to approach their emotions from different angles. Some may invent characters to explore parts of themselves they cannot yet face directly. Others may write to loved ones—alive or dead—saying what could never be spoken. Research supports the idea that writing can promote healing. Studies show that people who write about traumatic experiences tend to experience improved immune function and fewer visits to the doctor. The process of creating a narrative helps integrate fragmented emotions. Bolton notes that writing allows one to slow down and listen, both to the

[377] Bolton, G. (1999) The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing Myself. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

self and to the past. It invites clarity, not by forcing a conclusion but by making space for complexity. Writing can also act like a mirror, but one that does not simply reflect—it transforms. By putting feelings into language, people begin to reshape their experience. In this sense, writing becomes a form of self-creation. It opens the door to multiple selves, each with their own voice, allowing the writer to understand their inner contradictions without fear of breaking apart. Creative writing, then, is not separate from therapeutic writing. Many writers draw on personal pain to create fiction or poetry. But even for those with no literary ambition, writing offers value. It lets the inner voice speak, not to impress others, but to make sense of life. As Bolton writes, 'you cannot write the wrong thing'. The words, once written, begin to work on the writer themselves. Creative writing holds the power to heal not because it solves problems, but because it allows one to face them with care and attention. Writing can soothe, clarify, provoke, and transform. It is not just expression—it is listening, witnessing, and sometimes forgiving. As a practice of self-care and self-knowledge, it is always available, always personal, and often life changing. Bolton concludes that creative writing is not merely self-expression but a transformative act of self-creation, where the writer both uncovers and constructs the self through the process of writing.

Writing and difference

In his essay 'Freud and the Scene of Writing[378]', Jacques Derrida explores the deep ties between psychoanalysis and writing. His aim is not to psychoanalyse philosophy but to examine how Western thought has repressed writing in favour of speech, tracing this tendency back to Plato. He draws on Freud's theories to suggest that writing has not simply been excluded but internalised as a mechanism that philosophy both relies on and attempts to deny. Writing, for Derrida, becomes a kind of ghost that haunts Western metaphysics, disturbing its claims to presence, truth, and unity. Derrida sees Freud's concept of repression as central. Repression, as Freud described it, does not push ideas away entirely. Instead, it keeps them within the system, hidden yet active. Derrida uses this idea to describe how writing operates in the unconscious. It is not outside language but is built into its structure. Speech appears dominant, but writing shows the fractures and gaps that speech tries to cover. The unconscious does not speak; it writes. And this writing is not a stable record. It is made of traces—marks that indicate what has passed but can never fully return. He points to Freud's metaphor of the Mystic Writing Pad as an example of how memory works like writing. This children's toy, made of wax and a removable plastic sheet, allows impressions to be made and erased. Freud used it to explain how the mind retains traces of experience. Derrida argues that this metaphor shows how memory and perception depend on spacing, erasure, and repetition—not presence. The psyche, like the pad, cannot hold on to everything. It writes, erases, rewrites. This is not a flaw, but the very condition of remembering. The same structure shapes dreams. Freud compared dreams to cryptographic writing, a kind of secret script that must be interpreted. Derrida sees this as further proof that the unconscious is not ruled by speech but by a logic of inscription. Writing, in this sense, becomes the model for psychic life. Even Freud's earliest work, such as the 'Project for a Scientific Psychology', relied on metaphors of paths, breaches, and barriers—images of writing before Freud named it as such. For Derrida, the idea of the trace is central. A trace is not simply a sign of something that once was. It is also the mark of what can never be fully known. It is the effect of difference, of something always delayed, always deferred. Freud's concept of 'Nachträglichkeit', or deferred action, supports this: memory is not a return to the past but a re-inscription of meaning in the present. The past is never fully present; it is shaped

[378] Derrida, J. (1978) Writing and Difference. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

by what comes after. Writing makes this delay visible. It is not just a tool of language but a structure of time and subjectivity. In the end, Derrida argues that Freud's work, though still caught in some metaphysical assumptions, begins to undo them. Freud's metaphors, his reliance on writing, his notion of repetition and repression, all point to a deeper truth: that writing is not secondary to thought but its very condition. Writing is what allows thought to happen. It is the space where meaning breaks and is remade. Writing, then, is not just a record. It is an event. It is the trace of something that both is and is not. It shapes memory, identity, and time itself. And in this play of presence and absence, life and death, writing opens the space for thinking anew.

How to write a sentence

Stanley Fish begins 'How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One[379]' with a simple truth: if you want to write well, you must love sentences. Writing is not about ideas floating in the air or grand inspiration. It begins with a close attention to structure, to form, to how language works one sentence at a time. A sentence is not just a string of words. It is a shaped event, a thought given body. Fish insists that the sentence is the basic unit of composition and comprehension. Without understanding what makes a sentence work, one cannot learn how to think clearly, much less write clearly. Fish compares writing to painting. Painters do not begin with visions of masterpieces. They begin with paint. They explore what colour and texture can do. Writers begin with sentences. Not words alone—words only become meaningful when shaped by syntax. As Anthony Burgess once noted, syntax allows words to come alive. Syntax gives them direction, role, and force. Words become actions, subjects, feelings. Without syntax, they remain scattered parts. The sentence, then, is the tool that binds language into thought. Great writers, Fish shows, obsess over sentences. Flaubert paced his room, shouting out versions of a line until he found the one that captured the mood, the rhythm, the thought. He was not searching for the perfect word, but for a structure in which the words held each other tightly. Virginia Tufte's work, cited by Fish, explains how meaning arises not from words alone but from their relationship. A sentence, properly made, generates thought. It organises perception. A great sentence is not just a delivery system—it is an act of creation. Fish delights in sentences that strike with precision. He collects them. A single line from a movie or a court ruling can be a work of art. Justice Scalia, writing in dissent, once quipped, 'Interior decorating is a rock-hard science compared to psychology practiced by amateurs'. The power of that line is not in its legal argument but in its pacing, structure, and rhythm. It lands like a blow because of how it is written. It is efficient and sharp. Even a child can stumble upon a great sentence by instinct, placing just enough tension or ambiguity to pull a reader forward. The study of great sentences, for Fish, is not just for pleasure. It is the best way to learn how to write. Roland Barthes once said, 'There is nothing in discourse that is not to be found in a sentence'. The logic of a paragraph, an argument, or an entire book is present in a single well-crafted line. Hugh Kenner once advised a writer: if you can get the first sentence right, the rest will follow. This is because the first sentence contains the tone, rhythm, and logic of the whole piece. Writing a sentence is an act of design. Reading one is an act of discovery. The more one studies sentences, the more one sees their inner mechanics. And the more one imitates them, the closer one comes to mastering them. Writing well, then, is a matter of reading with care, noticing form, and practicing structure repeatedly.

[379] Fish, S. (2011) How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One. New York: HarperCollins.

The sentence as a world

Stanley Fish's 'How to Write a Sentence' treats the sentence not as a neutral tool but as a world unto itself. A sentence is not simply a vehicle for meaning. It is meaning, form, rhythm, argument, and architecture all at once. Before ideas can be communicated, they must be shaped. Sentences provide this shape. They do not merely report the world—they make it legible. Form comes first, Fish argues, because it is form that allows content to appear at all. Writing begins not with inspiration but with attention to structure. Syntax, for Fish, is where thought takes place. Sentences align actors, actions, and objects into coherent movement. Styles emerge from these arrangements. Some writers prefer the subordinating style, in which clauses nest within clauses to build logical force. Others write additively, allowing ideas to spill out, each thought tumbling into the next. And then there is the satiric style, where syntax becomes a tool of irony or critique, pulling apart what it also constructs. These styles are not arbitrary—they guide how one thinks and feels through language. The sentence does more than carry meaning. It performs. It opens and closes, advances and delays. First sentences establish a horizon; last ones deliver judgment, closure, or collapse. Fish points out that some sentences are so perfectly crafted, they seem to know they are being read. Philip Sidney's line from 'An Apology for Poetry' does not just talk about heroic action—it throws the reader into it, racing through the syntax before reflecting on what has just occurred. Milton, meanwhile, insists that writing well requires living well. His sentence from 'Apology' stretches beyond description. One must become the poem, not merely write it. Francis Bacon's famous sentence—'What is Truth? said jesting Pilate and would not stay for an answer'—withholds resolution. It exposes the blindness of its subject while denying the reader satisfaction. The sentence performs its own avoidance. Similarly, John Donne, grappling with the divine, builds a sentence that cannot hold still. It opens with confidence, then disintegrates into metaphor, unable to contain what it seeks to name. Language fractures under the weight of its subject, and the sentence becomes a confession of its limits. Fish shows how writers like Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford use sentences to reveal, not just describe. Conrad insists meaning lies not at the centre of the tale but in its edges. Sentences must circle, echo, and haunt. Ford's narrator in 'The Good Soldier' cannot make sense of his story, but the sentences betray more than he knows. Meaning seeps out not from comprehension but from arrangement, from the rhythm of the telling. Some writers use sentences to mirror time. Anthony Powell choreographs language to echo memory's pulse. Bunyan's sentence about Christian leaving home enacts inner conflict in syntax. The form does not just tell us something—it makes us feel it. Fish's message is clear. Sentences are not passive. They are dynamic, alive with tension, contradiction, and revelation. Each one is a crafted moment where thought meets form.

The art of dramatic writing

Lajos Egri's 'The Art of Dramatic Writing[380]' begins with a haunting tale: a man destroys sacred statues in ancient Greece, not from hatred but from a desperate desire to be remembered. When caught, he calmly explains that being forgotten is worse than death. He would rather die than go unnoticed. This story is not about madness, but motive. Egri uses it to show how powerful the need for significance truly is. It is one of the central human forces, and it drives much of what people do—whether they build, destroy, love, or lie. For Egri, all dramatic writing must begin with motive. Characters are not just people on stage or paper; they are driven by forces, needs, and desires. Without understanding what drives a character, a writer cannot create meaningful drama. Motive gives birth to conflict, and conflict is the heart of every story. But

[380] Egri, L. (1946) The Art of Dramatic Writing. New York: Simon & Schuster.

not just any conflict will do. The struggle must be rooted in who the characters are, not just what they want. Characters must evolve. Drama happens when inner traits clash with outer circumstances, forcing transformation. Egri argues that every good play begins with a premise. This premise is not just a theme or message. It is a dynamic statement about life, one that the writer believes and sets out to prove. For example, 'Blind ambition leads to destruction'. The play will then demonstrate this idea, not by stating it, but by letting it unfold through action. The premise shapes the entire structure. It defines character, conflict, and conclusion. Without it, the story drifts. Many playwrights, Egri suggests, rely on talent or instinct. But even the most gifted writers can fail without a firm grasp of structure. Like architecture or music, drama follows certain principles. These are not rigid formulas, but guides rooted in the laws of cause and effect. Conflict grows from character. Resolution grows from conflict. The whole play is a movement toward proving the premise through human behaviour under pressure. Egri challenges the old debate: is plot more important than character, or vice versa? He argues that it is the wrong question. Character and plot are inseparable. A weak character cannot sustain a strong plot. A good plot cannot exist without rich, complex characters. The structure of a play must grow organically from its characters' needs and choices. Everything must serve the premise. This principle applies not only to classical tragedies but also to modern dramas, comedies, and even thrillers. A crime story, for instance, should not just be about a murder, but about the human reasons behind it. Greed, fear, pride—these are the forces that drive action, and they must be made visible through the structure of the play. Writing, for Egri, is not a matter of waiting for inspiration. It is a craft built on insight into human nature. Once a writer understands motive, premise, and structure, the tools are in place. What remains is the labour of shaping the idea into a living, breathing drama.

Driving force behind playwriting

In 'The Art of Dramatic Writing', Lajos Egri insists that a great play begins not with plot or style but with character and premise. These are the invisible forces that give a story structure, movement, and meaning. A playwright's success depends on understanding human nature and building a story from that foundation. Without this, even the most stylish writing can collapse. Egri challenges the long-standing debate between those who prioritise plot and those who emphasise character. He argues that this is a false opposition. The two are inseparable. Plot is what a character does, shaped by their desires, fears, and contradictions. If a character is not well-constructed, no amount of clever plotting can compensate. Drama happens when a character must act under pressure, and that pressure reveals who they are. Every play must have a premise, not just a theme or idea, but a statement about life that the play sets out to prove. This is the spine that holds everything together. Egri gives examples like 'Blind ambition leads to destruction' or 'Frugality leads to waste'. A good premise contains a clear cause and effect: a character trait, a conflict, and a consequence. It is not just a moral, but a pattern of human behaviour that the play explores and confirms through action. Without a premise, a play becomes a collection of disconnected scenes. The audience may be entertained, but the story lacks depth and direction. With a premise, every element—character, dialogue, plot—serves a unified purpose. The writer knows where the story is going and why it matters. This gives the play coherence and emotional impact. Egri warns against relying on inspiration or instinct alone. Even talented writers fail when they lack structure. Drama, like architecture or music, has principles. These are not rigid rules, but natural laws based on how people think, act, and change. A strong play shows a character transformed through conflict. This transformation must follow logically from the character's traits and choices, not be imposed from outside. Dialogue, too, must grow from character. It should reflect a person's background, motives, and situation.

Clever lines mean nothing if they do not belong to the speaker. A mechanic does not speak like a poet. Forced elegance or wit breaks the illusion of reality and weakens the drama. The best dialogue reveals, advances, and prepares. It serves the story, not the writer's ego. A playwright does not need to preach. The message should be embedded in the characters and their journey. The audience will understand the premise if it is woven into the fabric of the play, not shouted at them. Great drama persuades not by argument but by showing. In the end, Egri's book is not a formula, but a method. He encourages writers to observe life, understand motive, and construct plays around human truth. A play should not be a display of cleverness, but a living structure, shaped by character and driven by a premise that reveals something real about the world.

Psychology of creative writing

In 'The Psychology of Creative Writing[381]', edited by Scott Barry Kaufman, Daniel Nettle explores the evolutionary roots of why people write fiction and why others are drawn to read it. Although writing itself is a cultural invention, the impulse behind storytelling, Nettle argues, comes from much older biological traits. Humans evolved as highly social beings. Living in groups demanded that early people track emotions, alliances, and intentions. The need to understand others gave rise to a cognitive toolset that includes language, theory of mind, and the ability to simulate imaginary scenarios. Fictional storytelling emerged as a natural extension of these traits. Storytelling allows humans to explore social dynamics in a safe, low-risk environment. Through characters, plotlines, and imagined consequences, people rehearse emotional experiences and social decisions. Reading or writing fiction strengthens empathy and sharpens social understanding. Nettle suggests that these benefits may explain why people spend so much time engaging with stories that have no direct survival function. Literature often revolves around themes like love, betrayal, rivalry, and kinship—scenarios with high evolutionary relevance. Creative writing is not just a personal hobby; it has historically been a way to gain social attention and prestige. Skilled storytellers once held respected positions in tribes and courts. Even today, successful authors and artists often enjoy admiration and influence. Geoffrey Miller's theory on sexual selection extends this idea, proposing that creativity signals intelligence and emotional depth—traits that can attract mates. Research supports this: people who excel in the arts often report more short-term romantic success. However, writing comes at a cost. It demands time, solitude, and psychological stamina. Few writers reach fame or financial security. Evolutionary models predict that in domains involving social display, success is unevenly distributed. Many compete, but only a few gain recognition. For someone to invest in creative writing, they likely possess traits such as high intelligence, imagination, and introspective depth. There is also a psychological toll. Creative writers tend to score high on openness, which helps them see connections others might miss. But this trait is linked to vulnerability, including susceptibility to mood disorders, hallucinations, and anxiety. Neuroticism—a tendency toward worries and emotional intensity—is also common among writers. These traits may fuel the creative process, providing emotional depth and observational sensitivity, but they can also lead to suffering. For some, writing may be both an outlet and a source of psychological strain. Nettle concludes that fiction persists not despite its costs, but because it aligns with deep human needs. It enables people to make sense of themselves and others. It can bind communities or elevate individuals. Whether read or written, stories fulfill essential functions—refining social cognition, offering emotional catharsis, and

[381] Nettle, D. (2009) 'The Evolution of Creative Writing', in Kaufman, S. B. and Libby, J. (eds) The Psychology of Creative Writing. New York: Cambridge University Press.

allowing individuals to broadcast their inner lives. The evolutionary lens does not reduce storytelling to biology but adds another layer to why it matters so much.

3.3. How to avoid speaking?

(Against speech: The ethics of the unsayable)

'The unsayable is not nothing—it is a shaping absence'.

Geoffrey H. Hartman, Saving the Text

How to avoid speaking?

In the lecture titled 'How to Avoid Speaking[382]', Derrida engages with the long tradition of negative theology to explore how language responds to what it cannot express. From the outset, he notes a peculiar obligation: to speak about that which resists speech. This tension between articulation and silence precedes the act of speaking. It is a demand embedded in the structure of thought itself. Negative theology is not one fixed doctrine but a diverse tradition. It stretches from the Neoplatonists to mystics like Meister Eckhart and continues into modern philosophical reflection. What unites these approaches is a shared scepticism about language's capacity to describe the divine. The divine is not simply another object among others, but something beyond being—what Dionysius the Areopagite called 'hyperousios'. As such, all predicative statements fall short. The only language deemed appropriate is one that negates itself: not this, nor that, nor anything at all. This apophatic practice, based on denial, is not simply rhetorical. It questions the foundations of meaning itself. Unlike ordinary negation, it refuses to be resolved. The denial becomes infinite. Yet this refusal is not nihilism. On the contrary, it opens space for a kind of affirmation—a movement that points beyond language without pretending to arrive anywhere conclusive. The critique of negative theology often accuses it of evasion, vagueness, or mysticism. But Derrida argues that this misses the point. Apophatic discourse is not about concealment for its own sake. It is about the limits of conceptual language and about gestures like prayer or invocation that do not fit within the frame of propositional speech. These gestures expose how language is always touched by absence, always marked by what it cannot contain. At the heart of this lies a paradox: in trying to name the unsayable, one inadvertently creates a theological structure. Every negation implies a transcendence. Thus, far from dissolving the divine, negative theology seems to produce it. Even atheism, Derrida suggests, may be the ultimate form of negative theology. To deny God through infinite negation is to affirm the necessity of the name 'God' as the placeholder for what escapes thought. This leads to the central distinction between negative theology and deconstruction. Negative theology aims toward a final silence, a union with the ineffable. Deconstruction does not. It remains in the flux of language, naming what escapes naming through terms like 'différance' or 'trace'. These terms do not point to a hidden presence. They indicate instability itself, the endless play that resists closure. Wittgenstein's line from the 'Tractatus'—'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'—becomes a turning point. Derrida does not read this as a prescription for silence, but as a transformation of silence into a speech act. Silence, too, speaks. It becomes part of discourse. One cannot truly avoid speaking.

[382] Derrida, J. (1989) 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', in Budick, S. and Iser, W. (eds) Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Even secrecy implies communication. Negative theology has often been linked to secrecy, but Derrida turns this around. Deconstruction does not protect hidden truths. It reveals the structure by which truths become uncertain, unstable. Language never closes in on itself. Meaning always slips. Silence, far from pure, is haunted by the return of speech.

Languages of the unsayable

In 'Languages of the Unsayable[383]', editors Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser explore how literature and theory engage with what cannot be fully expressed. They focus on the role of negativity—not as a denial, but as a space where meaning resists closure and language meets its limits. Rather than trying to recover lost content or fill gaps, this approach investigates how silence and absence actively shape the experience of reading and interpretation. Negativity here is not simple negation. It does not just oppose what is said, it operates in a more fluid way, undoing meaning while enabling its possibility. It does not resolve into synthesis, as in dialectical reasoning, but keeps meaning in motion. It opens space. It signals what lies just beyond expression—what presses at the edge of language but cannot be brought fully into speech. This kind of negativity is a force, not a void. It marks the tension between what is said and what resists being said. Wittgenstein's remark, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', is often seen as a limit. But Budick and Iser treat it as a challenge: not to stop at the unsayable, but to attend to how silence shapes what can be said. Silence is not the absence of meaning. It is the ground against which meaning appears, a condition for thought. This approach invites a reading practice that listens for gaps, pauses, and gestures that point beyond language. Negativity takes different forms. It is seen in tropes like apostrophe, which turns speech away from presence, calling out to the absent or unreachable. It is seen in the Platonic notion of 'khora', a space that receives without shaping. Negative theology, too, insists on speaking of the divine only through what it is not. These are not failed efforts at communication but different ways of articulating the inarticulable. In literature, these strategies appear across authors and styles. Paul Celan’s poetry is fragmented and indirect, resisting stable meaning yet opening deep emotional resonance. Samuel Beckett's work turns language against itself, emptying it of content while continuing to speak. For both, the interruption becomes part of the utterance. Art, as Heidegger suggests, both discloses and conceals—it never just shows but always hides something in the showing. Negativity also becomes political. In the film 'Gaslight', for example, the heroine’s silence is imposed, her perception discredited. Her eventual resistance is not loud but deliberate. Her return to voice dramatises how unsayability can be contested through acts of refusal and self-assertion. Here, negativity is not just abstract but embodied, woven into power and agency. Ultimately, the unsayable is not a problem to be solved. It is an element of language that reminds us of its limits. To engage with negativity is to recognise how language shapes, excludes, and gestures beyond itself. It is to listen carefully for meaning as it flickers, withdraws, and resurfaces in new forms.

Aesthetic negativity

In 'Aesthetic Theory[384]', Theodor W. Adorno offers a complex and often ambivalent account of negativity in art. Though commonly labelled a thinker of 'negative aesthetics', Adorno’s approach avoids simple oppositions. Negativity appears in many forms: as critique of bourgeois culture, as formal resistance to conventional beauty, and even as a refusal of

[383] Budick, S. and Iser, W. (eds) (1989) Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
[384] Adorno, T. W. (1970) Aesthetic Theory. Edited by G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann. Translated by R. Hullot-Kentor. London: Bloomsbury.

metaphysical claims. Yet his theory remains difficult to pin down, as negativity never becomes a stable category. It is a method, a structure, and a stance—but never simply one thing. For Adorno, art holds a privileged place in society precisely because of its refusal to conform. In a world shaped by exchange and instrumental reason, art becomes a space of non-identity. It resists being reduced to use, and in doing so, criticises the logic of commodification. Even when art appears decorative or useless, it still challenges the dominant system by existing outside its terms. This is the political dimension of negativity: protest through form, not propaganda. Adorno criticises works that uncritically affirm the social order. He refers to this as 'vile affirmation'. Art that simply mirrors its world without rupture or tension serves domination. Yet he also complicates this critique. Not all tradition is to be rejected. Older works can still carry negative force, especially when viewed from a world they no longer fit. The history of art, for Adorno, is dialectical—each new form negates its predecessor but also preserves it. Even modernist works, though radical, depend on what they refuse. This dialectical tension defines Adorno's notion of aesthetic form. Form is not a container for content; it is where contradictions are made visible. The structure of a work—its internal tensions, its resistance to easy harmony—becomes the space where meaning arises. Art does not imitate the world but dramatises its fractures. Even tightly composed pieces, like twelve-tone music, succeed not by unity but through dissonance. Negation, here, is a generative principle. However, Adorno warns against mistaking negation for nihilism. He is suspicious of art that rejects meaning entirely. In his view, the absence of meaning must still mean something. Works like Beckett's do not offer content in the usual sense, but their emptiness is itself expressive. They mark the impossibility of reconciliation. Yet Adorno also worries that this gesture can become empty repetition, a pose that mimics critique without depth. Adorno's aesthetics mirrors his larger philosophy. As in 'Negative Dialectics', he seeks not to dismantle thought but to push it beyond its limits. He does not call for silence but for forms that speak from the cracks in discourse. Still, his reliance on dialectics creates a limit. Negation always implies what it negates. The pure refusal he hopes for remains haunted by traces of affirmation. In the end, Adorno's vision of art is one of damaged hope. Art promises transcendence but cannot deliver it. Its strength lies in refusal, in its failure to resolve. This makes it true—not because it reveals reality, but because it reveals its breakdown.

Writing for mental clarity

Writing has long been used to process grief and trauma, but its value extends far beyond therapy. In 'Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain[385]' James Pennebaker and Joshua Smyth have shown that writing can clarify thoughts, support learning, and help people make sense of complex experiences. It is not just a reaction to pain but a proactive method for maintaining mental well-being and organising thought. People tend to enjoy writing expressively, even in everyday situations, because it offers a way to reflect, explore, and understand. Writing does not need an audience. Whether done privately in a journal, typed on a computer, or spoken aloud, the simple act of turning feelings and thoughts into words has been shown to produce both psychological and physical benefits. When people describe emotionally significant events, they begin to shape and organise them. What was once a chaotic memory becoming part of a narrative. This kind of writing is not limited to personal matters. It can be just as useful for understanding a historical event or navigating a major life change. In educational contexts, writing enhances learning. Traditional

[385] Pennebaker, J. and Smyth, J. (2016) Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain. New York: Guilford Press.

teaching often overwhelms students with facts. Like trauma, these experiences can be intense and difficult to process. Pennebaker and Smyth note that when students are invited to write about their personal reactions to academic content, the material becomes more relatable. In one experiment, writing for just ten minutes before class helped students connect with the subject matter. Discussions became livelier, and test scores improved. Writing encouraged them to personalise abstract ideas, making learning stick. Writing also strengthens memory and cognitive function. Studies show that people who write about difficult events perform better on problem-solving tasks. This benefit is not limited to trauma. Even writing about positive life changes, such as moving to a new city or starting a job, can ease the transition and improve adaptation. Medical students who engaged in reflective writing reported fewer symptoms of depression and needed fewer health visits. For children, the link between writing and thinking starts early. Lev Vygotsky believed that writing was an extension of speech and problem-solving. Before learning formal grammar, children use scribbles and symbols to express themselves. Vygotsky suggested that writing should first be taught as a way of communicating, not just a technical skill. This approach laid the groundwork for modern writing programs that value self-expression alongside structure. For adults, freewriting can unlock creativity. Writing without concern for grammar or audience often helps people overcome blocks and think in new ways. It can also help solve problems. By writing about a challenge, identifying barriers, and reflecting on possible solutions, individuals often come to new insights, even if not immediately. In short, writing offers more than communication. It brings order to experience, opens space for thought, and fosters resilience. Used intentionally, it becomes a tool not only for expression but for personal clarity and growth.

Life-Changing Narratives

In 'Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told[386]', Jeffrey Kottler explores how stories shape not only the way people understand their lives but also how they change. Stories are not just ways to describe experience—they are the frameworks through which people interpret their past, form identities, and imagine futures. In therapy, this function becomes even more visible. A person enters the therapeutic space carrying a narrative, often one of loss, guilt, or confusion. The therapist listens and helps reshape that narrative into one of possibility or understanding. This process, what Kottler calls 'restorying', allows people to see their lives differently—to stop being stuck characters and begin becoming authors again. But storytelling is not just for therapy. It is a part of everyday life. People tell stories to make sense of events, to entertain, to connect with others, or to explain who they are. These stories vary in complexity and depth. Some are told in passing—casual remarks about the day. Others are deeply rehearsed and repeated across years, shaping not only how the story is remembered but how the person remembers themselves. Kottler shows that memory is inseparable from narrative. What people recall is not just a set of facts but a shaped version of events, edited and retold until it fits a sense of self or purpose. Therapists, according to Kottler, are professional story-workers. They are trained not just to listen but to guide. They help clients question old narratives and try on new ones. Sometimes a therapist challenges a harmful story, other times they listen long enough for the client to revise it themselves. But the work is not one-sided. Therapists are also changed by the stories they hear. Listening to others forces them to reflect on their own experiences, often uncovering truths they had not fully faced. Kottler also warns of the dangers of 'destorification'—the loss of meaningful narrative in contemporary life. With social media, fast communication, and

[386] Kottler, J.A. (2014) Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told: Life-Changing Narratives in Therapy and Everyday Life. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

shrinking attention spans, people risk losing the depth and reflection that stories once offered. Quick posts and filtered photos replace sustained reflection. Still, he argues, the need for storytelling remains. Humans crave meaning, and stories continue to be the best way to find it. Even beyond therapy, stories play a crucial role in families, friendships, culture, and identity. Through myth, parable, or personal memory, people pass on values and wisdom. Stories teach, warn, inspire. They allow people to rehearse danger, explore emotion, and discover who they might become. Kottler's message is clear: stories are not just entertainment. They are tools for survival, empathy, and growth. In learning to tell better stories—or to listen more carefully to the ones already being told—people gain the ability to change themselves and others.

Honest markers of the self

In 'The Secret Life of Pronouns[387]', James W. Pennebaker explores how the smallest and most overlooked words in language—pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and articles—offer profound insights into human psychology. These 'function words' are not about the topics people talk about, but about how they think, feel, and connect with others. Although they represent only a fraction of the total vocabulary, they dominate daily speech. Pennebaker's research reveals that patterns in these words can predict personality traits, emotional states, social dynamics, and even deception. Rather than focusing on grammar or formal linguistics, the book centres on how language acts as a psychological mirror. Pennebaker and his team developed a tool called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) to systematically analyze large bodies of text. This software helped researchers examine how pronoun use changes across contexts, moods, and relationships. One striking finding is that people who use 'I' more often tend to be less powerful in social settings, not more self-assured. Leaders often reduce their use of 'I', signalling distance or control, while followers tend to increase it. The way people use language also changes under stress. During personal crises, function words shift noticeably. Those experiencing depression, for instance, use more first-person singular pronouns and fewer words that signal social engagement. People who lie tend to use fewer 'I' words, distancing themselves from the false story they are telling. The structure of speech—what is omitted as much as what is said—reveals the speaker's mental and emotional state. Pennebaker's research goes beyond individual psychology. Function word analysis has been applied to political speeches, literature, therapy transcripts, and social media. In politics, the way a candidate speaks can reveal underlying confidence, anxiety, or deception. In relationships, pronoun shifts between partners can indicate emotional closeness or detachment. Even literary style can be examined through pronoun patterns, shedding light on authorship and character development. Language patterns can also predict the trajectory of relationships. In studies of couples, those who used similar language styles were more likely to stay together. This matching, or 'language style synchrony', reflects unconscious alignment between people. It signals mutual understanding and compatibility, even when the speakers are not aware of it. These subtle cues, often invisible to conscious awareness, carry important information about human connection. The implications of this work stretch into health, education, law enforcement, and artificial intelligence. Analysing the way someone speaks can assist in early diagnosis of mental illness, improve therapy outcomes, or detect manipulation. In online spaces, language tracking can help detect bots, assess group dynamics, or measure changes in collective mood. Pennebaker shows that language is not just a way to express ideas—it is also a way to reveal what lies beneath

[387] Pennebaker, J. W. (2011) The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

them. The tiny, forgettable words are the most honest markers of the self. What people choose not to notice in their language may say more than the stories they think they are telling.

Tyranny of writing

In 'Tyranny of Writing: Ideologies of the Written Word[388]', editors Constanze Weth and Kasper Juffermans explore how writing, often seen as a neutral tool, exerts deep influence over how language is understood and used. They take the idea of 'tyranny' not to suggest that writing is bad, but to highlight how it shapes linguistic norms, governs access to knowledge, and reflects power structures in society. Their argument draws from Ferdinand de Saussure's critique of writing as a distorting mirror of spoken language—an imperfect system that often misleads scholars and everyday speakers alike. Writing, they argue, has long been associated with power. Historically, it enabled the birth of legal systems, bureaucracies, and religious institutions. Thinkers like Jack Goody credited it with enabling abstract thought, while others, like Roland Barthes, praised it for detaching meaning from authorship. But this same power has created social divisions. Literacy has often been a privilege, restricted to elites and used to exclude others. Even today, gaps in literacy mirror global inequalities, with some societies still lacking broad access to written communication. Both Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield criticised how written language dominates linguistic theory. Writing, they noted, is artificial and stable, unlike the living, changing nature of spoken language. Yet even as they made these critiques, they reinforced the very dominance they questioned by relying on writing in their own analyses. This paradox is at the heart of the book's argument: writing is a tool, but it is never just a tool. It becomes a gatekeeper. Paulo Freire famously viewed literacy as a path to liberation. But Weth and Juffermans show that writing can also reinforce dominance, particularly through the standardisation of grammar and orthography in schools. Teaching 'proper' language often marginalises local dialects, informal styles, and oral traditions. Writing becomes a way to police language, defining who speaks 'correctly' and who does not. Contemporary research challenges the divide between speech and writing. New Literacy Studies suggest that literacy is not a single skill, but a set of practices shaped by culture, class, and context. Studies of 'grassroots literacy' show how ordinary people use writing in informal, creative ways that resist official norms. The digital world complicates things further, blending writing with speech in texts, chats, and social media posts. In these spaces, literacy looks different—less formal, more dynamic. The book includes rich case studies. In France, state education policies pushed standardised French at the expense of regional languages like Breton. In colonial Sudan, writing systems were used to enforce racial hierarchies. In Sri Lanka, English fluency still marks class status, even among national figures. These stories show how writing intersects with politics, identity, and inequality. Writing can unify and divide, liberate and dominate. It plays a central role in shaping how people speak, learn, and live.

How is the internet changing writing

The internet has transformed writing by making it more informal, concise, and globally accessible, while also introducing new genres like blogging and microblogging. It encourages conversational tones, rapid communication, and collaboration through multimedia and real-time tools. Writing online fosters interaction, creativity, and cultural exchange, even as it challenges traditional standards. While critics see a decline in formality, others view these shifts as an evolution of language adapting to digital life. The internet has redefined not only how

[388] Weth, C. and Juffermans, K. (eds) (2018) Tyranny of Writing: Ideologies of the Written Word. London: Bloomsbury.

people write, share, and shape meaning, but redefined people themselves. In his essay 'How Is the Internet Changing Literary Style?[389]', Caleb Crain examines how the web is reshaping not just how people write, but how they think, read, and perform themselves through text. He begins by noting that while the internet offers a vast space for writing, surprisingly little fiction or poetry is crafted specifically for it. Most online writing, he observes, is quick, reactive, and attention-driven—traits that contrast sharply with traditional literary prose, which expects more patience from the reader. Crain uses an example from Philip Larkin's novel 'Jill', describing a quiet moment of reflection as a boy rides a train to college. This kind of writing, calm and observational, would likely fail to hold attention online. On the internet, readers expect speed, movement, and stimulation. They do not settle into slow, descriptive passages. They want immediacy—content that talks back, entertains, or delivers a jolt. The digital reader often skims rather than dwells. So online prose tends to shift its tone to something more casual, attention-seeking, even desperate. Crain reflects on blogging and notices that what succeeds online often does so not because of its quality but because it connects to a shared conversation. Timeliness, controversy, and group identity matter more than craft. The pull of online writing lies in validation and community. Even mistakes are tolerated if they feel authentic or emotionally resonant. This craving for visibility and interaction shapes tone, making online writing sound more like a chat than a crafted narrative. Reading online also feels different. It lacks the sense of leisure associated with books. Instead of immersive pleasure, it resembles work—flicking through posts, following links, keeping up. Crain likens this to scratching an itch. Reading no longer offers escape but feeds a cycle of mental overstimulation. You do not finish online reading refreshed; you leave it more distracted. Drawing from Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation, Crain argues that online writing is also a form of performance. The internet, with its collapse of public and private boundaries, pushes writers to always be 'on'. Unlike print, where a writer could step away, online writing is continuous and exposed. It encourages people to present rougher, more immediate versions of themselves, not because they want to, but because the medium demands it. There is no backstage anymore—everything is on display. This constant exposure affects the depth of communication. Without privacy or separation between audiences, nuance fades. Everyone has a voice, but the quality of dialogue can suffer. Goffman's ideas about tact and mystification—ways to preserve dignity and space—are hard to apply online. Crain worries this flattening may feel democratic but erodes the structures that once protected thoughtful writing. He closes with a reference to Adorno, who warned that intimacy without distance leads to estrangement. The web, by eliminating space between us, may weaken the careful balance between presence and solitude that once allowed literature to flourish. Writing once required a pause, a journey through silence and distance to reach its reader. Online texts arrive instantly, collapsing travel into exposure and leaving no time for the space that gives words their depth.

Sixth Chapter: DYSHONESTY

1. LYING

1.1.Why we lie?

(Truth's shadow: Why humans are wired to deceive)

[389] Crain, C. (2010) How Is the Internet Changing Literary Style? The New Yorker.

'The capacity to lie is a talent for fiction, and the talent for fiction is a sign of civilisation'.

— Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

'Lying is a cooperative act. A lie has no power by its mere utterance; its power emerges when someone else agrees to believe it'.

— Pamela Meyer, Liespotting

Evolutionary roots of lying

Lying is something people do without much thought. But why do we lie so easily? According to David Livingstone Smith in 'Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind[390]', the answer lies deep in our evolutionary past. In his book, he argues that deception is not just a human flaw—it is a survival tool shaped by natural selection. Just as animals camouflage themselves or pretend to be more dangerous than they are, humans developed more sophisticated ways to deceive. Speech, facial expressions, and even body language became tools not just for connection but for manipulation. Smith explains that lying helped early humans manage their social lives. In small groups, reputation mattered. Being able to lie—and lie well—could mean the difference between acceptance and rejection. Over time, humans became experts at not only lying to others but lying to themselves. This might sound strange, but it makes sense. If a person believes their own lies, they become more convincing to others. That is what Smith calls self-deception, and it is one of the most powerful traits people carry without realising it. Much of this happens unconsciously. Freud introduced the idea of the unconscious, but modern science has expanded it. Cognitive research now shows that much of our thinking happens beneath awareness. People make decisions, form beliefs, and rationalise behaviour without knowing why. This hidden part of the mind works like a backstage crew, shaping thoughts, words, and actions while the conscious mind takes the spotlight. Smith calls this system a 'Machiavellian module'—a kind of inner strategist that manages social life through subtle forms of deception. Smith also points out that humans are natural storytellers. We use language not just to describe the world but to frame it, bend it, and sometimes obscure it. Metaphors, jokes, polite deflections—all are forms of soft deception that grease the wheels of human interaction. These habits are not necessarily harmful. In fact, they often help people function in polite society. A harsh truth spoken at the wrong time can be more damaging than a gentle lie. The book draws on examples from nature, neuroscience, and psychology to make its case. One story involves a young baboon who cries out to attract help, only to steal food once the helper chases a rival away. This kind of deception is not unique to humans, but we have turned it into an art form. From fake smiles to false modesty, our daily lives are filled with behaviours that distort the truth in small, socially acceptable ways. Smith's argument is not that people are bad because they lie. It is that lying is part of being human. It is a strategy built into our minds, one that helped our ancestors survive. Even today, lying helps people navigate a world where too much honesty can be risky.

[390] Smith, D. L. (2004) Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Why do kids lie?

Children lie. They start young, and they do it for all sorts of reasons. 'In 'Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness[391]', Paul Ekman, along with Mary Ann Mason Ekman and Tom Ekman, explores the many faces of dishonesty in childhood. How should a parent react when a child lies, especially when it feels personal? He should explain why trust matters. When a child lies, it can make a parent feel betrayed, angry, or even like a failure. But reacting in anger can make things worse. Ekman argues that the real goal should be understanding the motive behind the lie. Often, kids lie to avoid punishment, to protect someone else, or just because they think it is easier than telling the truth. Recognising the reason behind the lie gives parents a better chance to respond in a way that encourages honesty rather than more deception. The book explains that not all lies are the same. Some are bold and obvious. Others are subtle—like hiding part of the truth. Ekman points out that even young children know concealment can count as lying. When asked about a story where a child stays silent after breaking something, most children agree that the silence is still dishonest. That awareness matters because it shows children have an early sense of morality and consequences. Another key point is how much children watch and imitate their parents. If a parent lies on the phone to avoid a dinner invitation or exaggerates on a resume, children notice that. Ekman warns that even small everyday lies, when repeated, can shape a child's understanding of truth. Modeling honesty is more powerful than any lecture. Cheating is another form of lying that Ekman explores. He shares that many students admit to it—even at a young age. Cheating, he argues, is not just about breaking rules; it is about hiding effort and misrepresenting oneself. And just like with other lies, the reasons vary—fear of failure, pressure to succeed, or even a belief that everyone else is doing it. Ekman does not offer quick fixes. Instead, he calls for patience, clarity, and consistency. He urges parents to create homes where telling the truth feels safe, even when the truth is hard. By avoiding harsh punishments and staying open to difficult conversations, parents can make honesty a more attractive choice.

Many faces of lying

In 'The Philosophy of Lying[392]' (2018), Clancy Bennett explores the ethical, linguistic, and psychological dimensions of lying, examining what distinguishes lies from other forms of deception and why truthfulness matters in both personal and social contexts. Lying is the act of saying something one knows to be false, with the aim of making someone else believe it. While it may resemble other forms of speech that stretch or twist the truth—like metaphor, irony, or exaggeration—it is distinct in its intent to deceive. It is a calculated act, even if sometimes automatic or habitual. Lies are not always told for selfish reasons. They can serve many ends: to avoid punishment, to gain advantage, to protect feelings, or to maintain social harmony. Lies come in many forms. A barefaced lie is openly false and unashamed. A big lie is so absurd it relies on people not believing anyone would dare make it up. Black lies are selfish and harmful, while blue lies support a group at the expense of the truth. A fib is a small and usually harmless untruth. Fraud and perjury, by contrast, are lies with legal consequences. Some forms of deception blur the line. Bullshitting, for instance, does not care whether something is true or false—it only wants to sound good. Paltering sticks to the truth technically but frames it in a way that misleads. Lies of omission hold back important facts. Then there are therapeutic fibs told to people with dementia, or polite lies meant to avoid hurting someone's feelings. Disinformation is more organised. It spreads falsehoods deliberately, often through media, to

[391] Ekman, P. (1991) Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness. New York: Scribner.
[392] Bennett, C. (2018) The Philosophy of Lying. London: Routledge.

manipulate public opinion. In contrast, confabulation is when someone makes false statements believing they are true—commonly seen in brain injury cases. Lying can even be expected, as in poker or espionage. Philosophers have long debated whether any kind of lie is ever justified. Some say it depends on the results. Others argue that lying is always wrong because it distorts language's purpose: to share truth. Culture is full of lies, from innocent childhood tales to powerful political myths. The famous 'memory hole' from George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four captures the terrifying potential of state-sanctioned lies: erasing the past to control the present. Even animals lie. Evolution seems to have selected for the ability to mislead, even in creatures that cannot speak. From harmless exaggerations to systemic misinformation, lying shapes daily life and political realities. It is both a survival tool and a social threat. Ethical views differ, but its consequences are real: broken trust, fractured relationships, and societies where nothing can be believed. Whether to protect, manipulate, or entertain, lying reveals the tension between truth and the human need to control perception.

Saying the 'thing which is not'

The article 'Saying, and Hearing, the 'Thing Which Is Not'[393]' by Hal McDonaldin, explores the cognitive and emotional complexities of lying and being lied to. It examines how humans process falsehoods, both as speakers and listeners, and how deception affects memory, trust, and psychological well-being. For humans, lying, joking, and speaking ironically are all part of everyday communication. The strangeness lies not in doing it, but in how easily it is done. Modern neuroscience now confirms what the Houyhnhnms sensed: saying or understanding things that are not literally true requires serious mental effort. In fact, the human brain performs a kind of cognitive acrobatics each time it processes a deceptive or ironic remark. Understanding the literal meaning of a sentence is one thing; grasping what a speaker means when the words say something else is something else entirely. The study 'Neural correlates underlying the comprehension of deceitful and ironic communicative intentions[394]' from the University of Turin tested how the brain reacts to different types of non-literal speech—specifically deceit and irony. Participants read short stories, each ending with a target sentence that, depending on the setup, was either honest, deceitful, ironic, or nonsense. Brain scans showed that both lies, and irony activated overlapping brain regions—specifically, the left inferior frontal gyrus, the middle frontal gyrus, and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. These areas help manage complex thought, working memory, and decision-making. But when people processed irony, a different region lit up too: the left middle temporal gyrus. This area seems to help us recognise when someone is not just being untruthful but wants us to notice the untruth—and understand something deeper through that shared awareness. Irony, then, demands an extra layer of mental engagement. It is not just about spotting a contradiction. It is about inferring intent. The speaker means for the listener to realise that the words are false and to interpret the real message from that falsehood. It is a type of communication that depends on trust, context, and a mutual understanding of subtext. So, when humans say, 'the thing which is not', it is not always a lie. Sometimes it is irony. Sometimes it is sarcasm. Sometimes it is a joke. The intention matters. And grasping that intention calls on complex cognitive systems. Swift's fiction captured a truth that science now confirms: the ability to say and understand what is not

[393] Psychology Today. (2018). Saying, and Hearing, the 'Thing Which Is Not'. [online] Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/time-travelling-apollo/201802/saying-and-hearing-the-thing-which-is-not [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

[394] Bosco, F. M., Parola, A., Valentini, M. C., & Morese, R. (2017). Neural correlates underlying the comprehension of deceitful and ironic communicative intentions. Cortex; a journal devoted to the study of the nervous system and behaviour, 94, 73–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2017.06.010

literally true is a mark of advanced cognition. It allows for persuasion, storytelling, humor, and subtlety. In the end, it is what makes human language far more than a set of signals—it makes it an art of meaning-making, shaped not just by facts but by imagination, empathy, and shared understanding.

Descartes's Demon

In 'Descartes's Demon[395]', David Livingstone Smith explores the unsettling idea that much of human thought is shaped by self-deception, illusion, and cognitive distortion. He examines how the mind can be its own deceiver, generating comforting fictions that shield people from uncomfortable truths about themselves and the world. In the 17th century, René Descartes imagined a demon—an all-powerful trickster whose sole aim was to deceive him. This demon planted false thoughts, manipulated evidence, and made Descartes doubt even his own senses. In response, Descartes decided to reject anything that could possibly be false, holding on only to what was certain. Eventually, though, he leaned on his faith in a benevolent God to resolve his doubts. In doing so, he backed away from the full implications of the demon's power. David Livingstone Smith revisits this thought experiment and argues that Descartes did not go far enough. The real demon, he says, is not some external trickster. It is inside us. It is the part of the human mind that hides truth from itself. This internal deceiver is not malicious—it evolved. For most of our species' history, people lived in small, tight-knit groups. In those environments, self-deception often helped. Believing one's own lies made it easier to lie convincingly to others. Thinking well of oneself, even when undeserved, made a person more confident, persuasive, and socially successful. But what once worked to help individuals survive now causes harm. In today's complex, globalised world, the same mental habits that kept our ancestors bonded in tribes lead us toward conflict, division, and dangerous oversimplifications. Smith points to patriotism, religious zeal, and moral crusades as examples of how shared illusions can spiral into hostility. People wrap themselves in beliefs that feel noble or true but often shield them from uncomfortable facts. These beliefs are not just personal; they become collective, reinforced by rituals, stories, and symbols. Smith suggests that while we cannot fully escape self-deception, we do not have to pass it on. Instead of teaching myths that glorify our nation or identity, we can teach honest history. We can challenge blind loyalty and encourage scepticism toward manipulative narratives. He calls this a kind of psychological vaccination—a way to strengthen the mind against seductive falsehoods, even if it remains vulnerable. One reason self-deception is so difficult to shake, Smith argues, is because of how the mind works. Freud once said most of what we think goes on outside our awareness. Modern research agrees. We often do not know why we do what we do, yet we believe we understand ourselves clearly. Meanwhile, we are quick to judge others and often do so accurately. This odd contrast—inner blindness and outward insight—stems from evolution. It gave us minds tuned to social life, capable of reading others but protecting us from our own truths. If we want to reduce the harm that comes from self-deception, Smith says, we need to face this inner demon. We need to understand how our minds hide from reality and why. That means questioning comforting stories, resisting easy moral certainties, and staying open to unsettling truths.

Scout mindset

Some people see the world as it is. Others, often without realising it, shape their view around what they want to believe. In 'The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly

[395] Smith, D. L. (2007) Descartes's Demon. In Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind. New York: St. Martin's Press.

and Others Don't [396]', Julia Galef explores what separates these two ways of thinking. She argues that being a good thinker is not just about having knowledge or intelligence. It is about adopting a mindset that favours clarity over comfort—a mindset that values truth even when it is uncomfortable. This is what she calls the scout mindset. Galef contrasts the scout mindset with what she calls the soldier mindset. The soldier mindset is defensive. It works to protect beliefs that feel good or serve social needs. It resists criticism and rejects evidence that might undermine a favoured idea. Scouts, on the other hand, are curious. They ask, 'What's actually true?' even if the answer is threatening. This attitude allows scouts to recognise mistakes, question assumptions, and change their minds when necessary. This difference matters more than people think. The soldier mindset can offer quick relief: it props up confidence, avoids conflict, and shields the ego. But it has long-term costs. It can lead to poor decisions, missed opportunities, and broken trust. Self-deception may help someone avoid discomfort in the moment, but it often makes life harder down the line. Galef shares examples of individuals who thrive because they embrace the scout mindset. Entrepreneurs who assess their odds realistically are better prepared for setbacks. Activists who acknowledge hard truths can build more effective campaigns. Even those facing personal crises—like being lost at sea or facing a terminal diagnosis—do better when they face reality directly. The key is not to be negative. It is to be honest. With honesty comes a clearer understanding of risks, goals, and possibilities. The scout mindset does not come naturally. It takes effort to catch yourself when you are bending the truth to feel better. Galef suggests practical techniques to train this habit: thought experiments, confidence estimates, and mentally rehearsing how you would respond to being wrong. Over time, these practices make it easier to notice bias and make better judgments. Galef also pushes back on the idea that self-deception is necessary for happiness. While some studies claim that people with 'positive illusions' are happier, the evidence is mixed. She argues that real optimism does not come from ignoring problems—it comes from confronting them constructively. You can be hopeful and realistic at the same time. In fact, the ability to face reality honestly can build the kind of emotional strength that lasts longer than false reassurance. The scout mindset will not eliminate fear or doubt. But it gives people a better way to handle them. By favouring accuracy over defensiveness, it leads to smarter decisions, stronger relationships, and a more grounded sense of confidence.

The dawn of language

The origins of language remain one of the most intriguing puzzles in human history. In 'The Dawn of Language: How We Came to Talk[397]', Sverker Johansson surveys a wide range of ideas about how language might have begun, what form it took, and what its early uses were. He challenges the assumption that speech was the first and only form of human communication. Some theories propose that our ancestors started with an inner 'mentalese', a kind of silent cognitive language, while others suggest that gesture-based systems, like early sign language, were our first tools of expression. Chomsky's influential view sees language as a mental tool that emerged before it was used for communication. According to this model, a genetic mutation created a 'grammar engine' that allowed for complex thought. Only later did humans realise they could share these thoughts externally. But Johansson points out the issues with this view: how would such a system develop without external interaction, and why would internal language mirror the sequential patterns of speech? An older but still compelling theory holds

[396] Galef, J. (2021) The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't. New York: Portfolio.

[397] Johansson, S. (2021) The Dawn of Language: How We Came to Talk. Translated by Frank Perry. London: Macmillan.

that sign language came first. Humans gesture naturally, often without realising it. Babies sign before they speak. People even move their hands while talking on the phone. Despite this, most communities transitioned from signing to speech. Johansson suggests that early language probably included both gesture and vocalisation. Over time, cultural and social pressures nudged most human groups toward speech as the dominant form. When it comes to actual sounds, language appears to have developed not from design but from use. Humans have flexible vocal tracts capable of producing a wide range of sounds, but each language selects only a subset. Research indicates that these choices emerge through interaction. People unconsciously adapt their speech to be more understandable, resulting in stable systems of vowels and consonants. This dynamic, grounded in mutual intelligibility, explains how spoken language became structured and consistent. But what were people talking about in the beginning? Some theories focus on cooperation: scavenging parties signalling about the location of carrion or dangers en route. Others point to teaching—explaining how to make tools—or storytelling, which fosters social cohesion and passes down knowledge. Music also enters the debate. Darwin speculated that singing preceded speech, a view that reappears in theories of a musical proto language. Yet music, while emotionally powerful, lacks the structured meaning that defines language. Johansson also explores how language might have supported social strategies. Among chimpanzees, alliances form through grooming and quiet coordination. Humans may have replaced this with 'grooming talk'—gossip and small talk that bind large groups. Language also allows for manipulation. It helps shape others' perceptions, as when new parents talk about a baby's resemblance to its father. In this view, language evolved not just to share information, but to guide thought, reinforce bonds, and secure influence. Johansson concludes that language did not start with a single spark. Instead, it emerged gradually from a mix of cognitive advances, ecological needs, and social functions. It began as a blend of signs, vocalisations, and imitation. Through repeated use, these became more abstract and flexible, allowing humans to cooperate, instruct, bond, and persuade as no other species can.

Language as a tool of lie

In 'Human Language as a Tool of Lie[398]' Constantinos Maritsas offers an unconventional view on the origins and function of human language. He argues that language did not emerge merely for communication, but rather as a strategy—specifically, a deceptive one. His idea is rooted in Darwinian theory. For Maritsas, men developed language to describe their supposed heroic actions. The purpose? To gain the favour of women and secure reproductive success. In other words, lying was built into language from the very beginning. The primal lie, he says, is something like 'I killed the bear', said not by the man who did it, but by one who watched from a distance. This was not just boasting. It was survival. Language gave weaker men a tool to compete with stronger ones—not through action, but through narrative. Maritsas defines the lie as 'someone else's truth'. The sentence carries weight. It suggests that language distorts reality as much as it reflects it. In this view, civilisation itself is not a product of the fittest surviving, but rather of the most persuasive. Maritsas replaces 'natural selection' with what he calls 'civilisational selection'. The traits that flourish are not brute strength or raw intelligence, but the ability to craft appealing stories. This reframing challenges common views of progress and achievement. What if civilisation rewards not those who do, but those who speak best about

[398] Maritsas, C. (2010). Human Language as a Tool of Lie. Cultura International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology, 7(2), pp.234–244. doi:https://doi.org/10.5840/cultura20107217.

what they (or others) did? Maritsas breaks language into two streams: poetry and prose. Poetry, he suggests, originated with men. It was a way to elevate everyday acts into epic deeds. Poetry, in this sense, was not just art but advertising—heroic marketing aimed at winning attention and affection. Prose, on the other hand, developed later when women adopted language for practical purposes. While poetry glorifies, prose organises. One dramatises; the other manages. Syntax and grammar, he argues, emerged to support this narrative function. It was not enough to gesture or make sounds. To lie convincingly, one needed structure. Stories required order—who did what to whom, when, and how. As syntax developed, it allowed for more elaborate storytelling. Maritsas points to experiments with dolphins, showing how different word orders change meaning. Human language did the same, but with far greater subtlety and consequence. The main thesis remains sharp: lying is not an unfortunate misuse of language—it is its origin. Every sentence carries the potential for deception. The more polished the language, the more powerful the lie. According to Maritsas, this makes language not just a tool of coordination or expression, but a weapon. And like all weapons, it can be used wisely or recklessly. In the end, he calls for a kind of awareness. If language was born to deceive, people must remain alert to its influence. Understanding how words shape perception is the first step to resisting manipulation. The challenge is not to abandon language, but to use it with care. Because if every lie is built on a structure of words, then every truth must learn to live there too.

Born liars

All humans who use language lie. Not just occasionally, not only under pressure, but as part of everyday life. In 'Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit [399]', Ian Leslie explores the idea that deception is not a flaw in human nature, but one of its defining features. Lying is not something that emerged as an unfortunate consequence of society—it is a tool shaped by evolution, honed by the demands of social living, and woven into our intelligence. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, offers a compelling theory for the rise of deception. He argues that early humans, originally solitary and content, became social beings. As people formed families, then communities, they developed language, tools, and agriculture. These advances led to the concept of private property, which in turn demanded systems of law and justice. But once people had something to lose—and others had something to envy—truth became negotiable. Inequality bred fear, pride, and ultimately, lies. With this shift came a divide between being and appearing. People began to worry more about how they were perceived than who they really were. Rousseau saw this as the beginning of corruption. A society that rewards appearances over honesty creates conditions where lying becomes not only common, but necessary. Rousseau did not argue that lying was always immoral. In his Reveries of the Solitary Walker, he claimed that not all truths are equal. Some truths can harm, some are neutral, and some lies can even serve justice. He believed in sincerity—but a sincerity that came from within, not one imposed by rigid social rules. Where Rousseau saw complexity, Immanuel Kant drew hard lines. For Kant, lying was always wrong. In On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy, he writes that deception undermines trust, which is essential to human reason and communication. Allowing lies, even for good reasons, destroys the very ground of morality. If everyone lied when it felt justified, then truth would lose its value. For Kant, truth-telling is not about consequences—it is about respecting others as rational beings. Ian Leslie picks up this tension and broadens the frame. He points out that deception is not only moral or immoral—it is also biological. Research in primatology shows that the most socially intelligent animals are also the most deceptive. Chimps hide food, mislead rivals, and even fake injuries. The more

[399] Reference: Leslie, I. (2011) Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit. Quercus.

complex the social group, the more cunning the individuals. Richard Byrne and Andrew Whiten's studies reveal that deception is linked to brain development. The smarter the animal, the more likely it is to lie. Human children begin to lie as soon as they develop theory of mind—the ability to imagine what someone else knows or believes. This typically starts around age three. Far from being a sign of moral failure, lying is a milestone of cognitive growth. It shows that a child can see beyond their own perspective. Leslie argues that this link between lying, and intelligence continues into adulthood. To lie well requires empathy, imagination, memory, and self-control. Culture also plays a role. In many societies, especially those that value politeness and social harmony, deception is not only tolerated but expected. White lies smooth over awkward moments. Flattery builds relationships. Even silence can be a form of concealment. These everyday forms of dishonesty do not stem from malice. They reflect the human need to belong, to avoid conflict, and to shape social reality.

Trust me, I am lying

In today's media environment, lies do not just spread—they are built into the system. Ryan Holiday, in his book 'Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator[400]', lays bare the machinery behind online news and shows how easily it can be manipulated. As a former media strategist, Holiday admits to using this system to his advantage, creating headlines, fake outrage, and viral stories for clients. His main point is unsettling: the modern media economy is not broken—it works exactly as it was designed to. And that design rewards deception. Blogs and digital news sites run on attention. They do not get paid for being accurate; they get paid when people click. That simple fact changes everything. Writers and editors are under pressure to produce content quickly, to chase what's trending, and to grab attention by any means necessary. Truth becomes secondary if it matters at all. A story does not need to be true to go viral—it just needs to provoke a reaction. Outrage, curiosity, fear, and scandal are the tools of the trade. Once a piece gets enough traction, it spreads to other outlets, often without anyone fact-checking the original source. Corrections, if they come at all, are buried or ignored. By then, the damage is done. People believe what they read, even when it has been proven false later. Holiday explains how easy it is to exploit this system. He describes planting fake stories, manipulating blog writers, and watching as false narratives made their way up the media chain—from obscure blogs to national news. This is not just a one-off trick. It is the standard operating procedure for marketing firms, political campaigns, and even some journalists. The media has become a game of influence, not information. The problem is not only with the people producing the news. It is also with those consuming it. Readers share articles without reading them. Outrage spreads faster than curiosity. The more sensational the story, the more attention it gets, which means more ad revenue for publishers. This creates a feedback loop where the worst content gets rewarded, and thoughtful reporting gets ignored. Holiday argues that the system is beyond repair. It is not just a few bad actors or a couple of rogue blogs. The entire structure incentivises dishonesty. Even the people who built it, like Nick Denton of Gawker, have expressed regret. But regret does not undo the damage. So, what can be done? Holiday does not offer easy answers. He suggests that readers must change their behaviour. Stop clicking on rubbish. Stop sharing before thinking. Demand better from the platforms and outlets that shape public conversation. If people reward honesty and depth instead of outrage and spectacle, media companies will have to adapt. But until that shift happens, the truth will continue to lose out to the loudest lie.

[400] Holiday, R. (2013) Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator. New York: Portfolio.

Everybody lies

In 2016, political analysts were confident that Donald Trump would fail. His crude language, unfiltered remarks, and polarising views seemed too extreme for voters. Most polls reinforced this belief. Yet, Trump not only won the Republican nomination but also the presidency. In ' Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are.[401]' Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, a data scientist and former Google data analyst, saw something others missed. He looked not at what people said, but at what they searched. The idea that people lie in public but tell the truth in private is old. What is new is the scale at which this can now be measured. Google searches reveal what surveys often conceal. Online, people type in their fears, prejudices, desires, and insecurities without filters. Stephens-Davidowitz used this data to uncover patterns that traditional polls missed. His interest began during the 2008 election. Barack Obama's victory was hailed as a sign that America had moved past its racial history. Surveys showed that most people did not care about Obama's race. But when Stephens-Davidowitz examined Google Trends, he found disturbing results. Racist searches were frequent and widespread, particularly in areas where Obama underperformed relative to expectations. This hidden bias, invisible in public discourse, suggested that racism was still alive—and influential. Google data does not just reveal racism. It exposes discrepancies across many areas. Surveys claim men and women use condoms equally. Google searches tell a different story. People claim to be happy in marriage yet search for signs of cheating or marital regret. These quiet confessions show that people often present a curated version of themselves in surveys and on social media, while their true concerns lie elsewhere. A separate study of newspaper language shows that conservative outlets used words like 'homosexuals', while liberal ones used 'same-sex couples'. This language choice aligned more with readers' politics than with editorial stance, showing how media often reflects audience beliefs. With digital archives and algorithms, researchers can now track how language reveals political leanings over time. Big Data even offers insight into romantic behaviour. Analysing dating conversations, researchers found patterns: men show interest by making jokes and keeping a steady tone; women use more pitch variation and self-references. Text can predict if people will go on a second date. It can even suggest which marriages might succeed. Still, Big Data is not always truth. Social media, especially Facebook, is a stage. People share what they want others to see. Online, people do not reveal what they consume; they reveal what they want others to think they consume. Stephens-Davidowitz argues that we now live in an age where words are data. The internet has become the world's largest unintentional psychological study. Our clicks, searches, and posts form a map of our inner world. The challenge is not just collecting this data but interpreting it responsibly. Big Data will not solve all problems. But it can expose what people really think, even when they will not admit it. This dual nature of Big Data—its capacity to liberate and control—makes it both promising and dangerous. On one hand, it reveals patterns hidden in plain sight. On the other, it allows quiet forms of discrimination. When language, browsing habits, and preferences are mined for clues, people become vulnerable to systems that reward predictability over fairness. Algorithms do not just measure the world; they shape it. Who gets hired, who gets a loan, and who gets charged more are increasingly data-driven decisions. But behind each number is a person who may never know how they were judged. If everyone lies, then the real power belongs to those whose lies others repeat as truth. In this sense, the most dangerous authority is not the one that enforces rules, but the one that convinces the world to believe what it knows is false. As Senator Roark

[401] Stephens-Davidowitz, S. (2017) Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

says in 'Sin City' (2005), “Power comes from lying… Once everyone agrees with what they know isn’t true, you’ve got ’em by the balls.”

How many people finish books?

In the age of information, books still hold symbolic power—but not always the substance. Many people claim to have read books they have not, turning reading into a performance rather than a practice. A survey marking World Book Day revealed that 61% of British respondents admitted to lying about having read at least one book, often to appear more intelligent or cultured. Orwell’s '1984' was the most falsely claimed read, with 42% of people pretending they had completed it. Other revered titles like 'War and Peace' (31%), 'Ulysses' (25%), and even the Bible (24%) followed. Despite their public claims, readers often preferred the work of more accessible authors such as J.K. Rowling and John Grisham—names they were less inclined to confess in surveys. This phenomenon is not limited to what people say, it is also reflected in their behaviour. Amazon Kindle data has shown stark differences in book completion rates: while more than 90% of users finished Donna Tartt’s 'The Goldfinch', only 7% completed Daniel Kahneman’s 'Thinking, Fast and Slow'. These numbers expose the tension between cultural aspiration and actual engagement. Books become cultural signifiers, social badges worn to impress, even as the content itself remains unread. The result is the rise of what might be called 'pseudo-reading'—a practice where people surround themselves with the aura of literature without the labour of finishing it. But the consequences of this behaviour extend beyond literary embarrassment. In the digital age, pseudo-reading is no longer just a private act of bluffing—it is data. Every unfinished eBook, every falsely marked 'read' in a social profile, every tweet praising a classic never opened becomes part of a vast pool of information about public taste, identity, and behaviour. This data is harvested, analysed, and monetised by platforms and algorithms, shaping everything from publishing trends to political messaging. Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, in 'Everybody Lies', originally hoped Big Data might lead him to personal insight or even love. Instead, he discovered that Big Data has begun transforming social science into something resembling a hard science. By analysing online behaviour—including reading patterns—researchers can now test hypotheses about identity, aspiration, and deception with remarkable precision. Social scientists are no longer limited to interviews or broad surveys; they can track the granular habits of millions. This shift has important implications. With data from e-readers, search engines, and social media, researchers can distinguish between what people say they do and what they do. They can observe how often people open difficult texts, where they stop reading, and how they share or comment on books they have never finished. Corporations and political strategists exploit this gap between image and behaviour. Book preferences become marketing tools, political tropes, or signals for targeted content. The language of culture becomes another channel for profiling and persuasion. In this context, pseudo-reading becomes not just a harmless social performance but a vulnerability—a pattern of behaviour easily mined and manipulated. Big Data turns the lie of having read '1984' into something actionable, something measurable, something profitable. And in a world increasingly driven by algorithms, even unfinished books contribute to the construction of public opinion, cultural narratives, and consumer behaviour. Thus, the literary bluff, once confined to dinner party conversations, now shapes industries. The unread book is no longer inert—it is a digital trace, part of the vast machinery of surveillance capitalism. As Big Data rewrites the way human behaviour is tracked and theorised, pseudo-reading is no longer just a symptom of insecurity—it is raw material for manipulation. The pseudo-reading society, where literary bluffing replaces genuine engagement, has become fertile ground for

Big Data manipulation. Unread books are turning into powerful tools for shaping perception, behaviour, and public opinion.

1.2. Conspicuous dishonesty

(Fudge factors and false faces: The ethics of everyday deceit)

'Our dishonesty is proportional to our ability to rationalise it'.

— Dan Ariely, The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty

Honest truth about dishonesty

In 'The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves [402]', Dan Ariely explores the subtle and often unconscious ways people cheat and deceive. He argues that dishonesty is not limited to a few bad actors but is instead a common human tendency, shaped by psychological and social factors. People usually do not set out to lie or steal in grand ways. Instead, they bend rules just a little, telling themselves stories that make those actions feel justified. Ariely challenges the idea that cheating is always a rational cost-benefit decision. While traditional economic models suggest that people weigh risks against rewards, he presents research showing that our choices are rarely so calculated. Instead, we tend to cheat just enough to benefit but not so much that we lose our self-image as good people. That is why small dishonest acts are more common. They are easier to excuse and easier to forget. He shows how this works through various experiments. In one, participants were given a chance to cheat on a math test for money. Most did not cheat outrageously but altered just enough answers to make a profit while still feeling honest. Another study found that people wearing counterfeit designer sunglasses were more likely to lie and cheat. The message: even seemingly harmless actions like wearing fakes can shift how we see ourselves and how we behave. Ariely also explores how factors like mental fatigue, social cues, and creativity affect our honesty. When people are tired or under cognitive stress, they are more likely to cheat. When they see others around them behaving dishonestly, they feel more comfortable doing the same. And creative individuals, he notes, are particularly skilled at rationalising their actions. They can craft believable stories that make dishonesty seem like a reasonable choice. Conflict of interest plays a big role too. People often do not notice how their own incentives distort their thinking. Ariely tells stories of doctors who recommend unnecessary procedures or financial professionals who inflate numbers—rarely out of malice, but because their goals subtly warp their judgment. Even full disclosure, like telling someone you have a bias, does not always help. It can make the advisor feel licensed to push harder, while the listener still underestimates the distortion. Dan Ariely argues that most people cheat less than they could. His research suggests that dishonesty is not driven by criminal intent or a cold calculation of risk. Instead, people cheat just enough to gain something while still seeing themselves as honest. This balance is what he calls the 'fudge factor'. It explains why everyday dishonesty often happens in small doses. People fudge timesheets, inflate small expenses, or ignore minor rules—not because they are villains, but because they can justify these acts to themselves. In experiments like the matrix task, a few participants exaggerate wildly, but the majority cheat just a little. These minor deviations are less noticeable but more widespread. Collectively, they amount to more harm

[402] Ariely, D. (2012) The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves. New York: Harper.

than big scandals. Even in areas like infidelity, Ariely believes people rarely approach decisions with pure cost-benefit logic. Instead, they justify small acts of disloyalty, often seeing themselves as mostly faithful. While cheating in romantic relationships is harder to study experimentally, it still reflects the broader trend: people bend rules just enough to feel okay about themselves. The lesson here is not that people are angels. Dishonesty is common, but it is rarely extreme. And because people cheat within the limits of self-image, punishment alone will not fix the problem. Ariely suggests other approaches: moral reminders, ethical pledges, and structured rituals that help people reset their moral compass. Confession, holidays, or symbolic gestures can all help people reflect and realign with their values. One historical example he finds useful is the Roman custom of whispering 'Memento mori' to victorious generals. It is a reminder of fallibility. Ariely believes we need similar reminders about our ethical weaknesses. We are not perfectly rational, so systems should be designed to account for those blind spots. What we need is a shift in how we think about cheating. It is not always about bad apples. Most dishonesty happens in small ways, driven by social influence, self-justification, or momentary lapses. By acknowledging that everyone is a little dishonest, Ariely argues, we can create more humane and effective interventions. The goal is not to catch big cheaters. It is to help ordinary people stay true to the better version of themselves they want to believe in. Ironically Ariely, faced allegations and an investigation regarding data fabrication in his research, particularly concerning studies on dishonesty. Duke University investigation cleared him of knowingly using fabricated data, but it did find that data in a specific honesty-pledge study had been manipulated. This led to the retraction of the study, which had examined the impact of an honesty pledge on odometer readings reported to an insurance company. Memento mori.

Lying and deception theory

Lying and deception are everyday behaviours but understanding what they really are—and when they are morally wrong—is far from simple. In his book 'Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice[403]', Thomas L. Carson tries to untangle these questions by carefully defining both concepts and testing them against different ethical theories. He shows that the moral weight of a lie or a deceptive act often depends on subtle differences in context, intent, and interpretation. Carson begins with definitions. A lie, in his view, happens when someone makes a statement, they believe to be false while implying that it is true. Interestingly, he argues that an intent to deceive is not always necessary for something to count as a lie. The key is that the speaker 'warrants' the truth of what they are saying—gives the impression that they are being truthful—even if everyone knows the statement is false. These so-called bald-faced lies still count because they breach the basic trust that underpins communication. Deception, on the other hand, is broader. It includes anything meant to cause someone else to hold a false belief. This can involve speech, but also actions, omissions, or misleading truths. Telling the truth in a way that is intended to mislead—such as omitting crucial context or emphasising the wrong facts—can still qualify as deception. Carson makes clear that deception is not always lying, and lying is not always effective deception. These are overlapping but distinct ideas. To explore the ethics of these behaviours, Carson turns to a range of moral theories. Kant famously claimed that lying is always wrong because it violates a moral law that must apply universally. Carson finds this view too rigid. On the other end of the spectrum, act-utilitarianism allows lying if it leads to better consequences overall, but that seems too permissive—ignoring the long-term harm that lies often cause. Carson finds a middle ground in a principle like the golden rule: if

[403] Carson, T. L. (2010) Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

you would not want to be lied to, you should not lie to others in that same kind of situation. This approach avoids relying on vague intuitions and focuses instead on consistency and fairness. Carson applies this framework to real-world settings. In business and politics, where trust is crucial, the damage from lies and deception can be especially severe. Selling a used car while hiding flaws, omitting facts in a political speech, or spinning statistics to mislead—these are all forms of deception that do not always involve outright lies but still erode trust. Carson argues that in such contexts, professionals have a duty to be not just technically honest, but open and transparent. He ends by distinguishing between two types of honesty. There is a basic honesty—just not lying or misleading. Then there is a deeper honesty, which means being candid, forthcoming, and willing to share the whole truth. The former is a minimum standard; the latter is an aspirational ideal.

Weaponised lies

In a world flooded with information, much of what we think we know comes not from our own experience but from what others tell us. We hear it from teachers, news outlets, websites, social media, or even casual conversation. But not all of it is reliable. Some of it is outdated, some distorted, and some false. In 'Weaponised Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era [404]', Daniel J. Levitin urges readers to approach information with a sharper eye and a clearer mind. Levitin reminds us that the truth can be twisted in subtle ways. Half-truths are especially dangerous because they carry a trace of credibility. People are more likely to accept them without question. And once an idea takes hold—true or not—it can be hard to dislodge. The only defence is careful thinking and a willingness to question what appears obvious. To evaluate a claim, we need to start with the source. Who is saying it? What are their credentials? Are they an expert in the field they are speaking about, or just borrowing the language of authority? Many websites look professional or trustworthy, but the names behind them may not be. Even academic-sounding domains like .org or .edu do not guarantee accuracy. Some are operated by organisations with clear agendas. Others simply post unchecked or biased material. That is why it is essential to check the motivation behind the message. Industries, politicians, and interest groups all have reasons to frame facts in ways that benefit them. A food company might downplay harmful ingredients. A government might release only favourable statistics. Even legitimate experts can go off course when speaking outside their own field. Levitin warns us to look for sources grounded in peer-reviewed research or consistent editorial standards, not just reputation or name recognition. One challenge of the digital age is that bad information does not disappear. Even after a false story is debunked, it can linger online for years, reshared by people who never saw the correction. Fact-checking sites like Politifact or RetractionWatch are useful, but they do not catch everything. Readers must stay engaged and check facts themselves—especially when those facts influence serious decisions, like voting or health care. Levitin also emphasises the importance of understanding numbers. For example, many people confuse incidence (new cases) with prevalence (total existing cases), especially in health reporting. Raw figures can be misleading without context. Are the numbers adjusted for population size? Are they part of a trend or a one-time spike? Misused statistics are among the most common tools of deception. In the end, the best protection against manipulation is a set of habits: question authority, examine evidence, and resist easy conclusions. Lies that mix truth and fiction are especially effective. But once we learn the techniques that make lies persuasive,

[404] Levitin, D. J. (2017) Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era. New York: Dutton.

the same knowledge that could protect us can just as easily tempt us to use those lies for our own advantage.

Reading Lies

Most people believe they can spot a lie by reading body language. They expect liars to look nervous, fidget, or avoid eye contact. These ideas are widespread, but they rarely hold up under scrutiny. In 'Reading Lies: Nonverbal Communication and Deception[405]', Aldert Vrij and his co-authors show that these common beliefs about nonverbal signs of deception are mostly inaccurate. Scientific studies have tested these assumptions, and the results are not what most people expect. One popular theory suggests that lying triggers emotions like guilt, fear, or excitement. These feelings, in turn, are thought to leak out through facial expressions or nervous movements. But when researchers look closely, they find that truth tellers in stressful situations often appear just as anxious as liars. Emotional cues are not consistent, and they do not reliably point to deception. Another theory focuses on mental effort. Lying, it turns out, is hard work. A liar must invent a story, keep it straight, and watch the listener's reaction—all at the same time. This extra effort can sometimes lead to longer pauses or fewer hand gestures. Still, these signs are subtle and often go unnoticed unless specific interview techniques are used to highlight them. A third approach sees lying as a planned behaviour. People who lie may try to control how they look, avoiding anything that seems suspicious. But this strategy creates a new problem: truth tellers often act the same way. When someone knows they are being watched, they may also become self-conscious, even if they are telling the truth. The overlap in behaviour makes it hard to tell the difference. Across many studies, the most useful clues for spotting lies do not come from gestures or expressions. They come from words. When people are asked open-ended questions, liars tend to provide shorter answers, fewer details, or vague explanations. Truth tellers are usually more specific and willing to give checkable facts. Listening closely to what someone says can be more revealing than watching how they say it. Despite all this, myths about nonverbal 'tells' remain strong. People still believe liars will not meet your eyes or will shift in their seat. These ideas stick around because of confirmation bias—people notice what matches their beliefs and ignore what does not. They also rarely get feedback. After a conversation, they often never find out if the other person was lying, so their false ideas never get corrected. Future research might find that certain combinations of gestures or facial movements do carry more meaning than single actions. But for now, the evidence shows that nonverbal cues alone are weak indicators of deception. What matters more is how someone responds to carefully chosen questions and whether their answers make sense. The only safeguard is to acknowledge that deception is not only a common human practice but also an inherent tendency of language itself, thereby requiring continuous vigilance.

The importance of being honest

In 'The Importance of Being Honest: How Lying, Secrecy, and Hypocrisy Collide with Truth in Law[406]', Steven Lubet examines how truth, deception, and ethics intertwine within the legal world. Honesty is the core expectation in law, yet it is often compromised by professional obligations, personal biases, and social pressures. Lubet begins by acknowledging how even sincere efforts to tell the truth—such as testifying in court—are complicated. Observation,

[405] Vrij, A., Hartwig, M. and Granhag, P. A. (2019) Reading Lies: Nonverbal Communication and Deception. In Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage. London: Routledge.

[406] Lubet, S. (2008) The Importance of Being Honest: How Lying, Secrecy, and Hypocrisy Collide with Truth in Law. New York: NYU Press.

memory, and expression each carry their own limits, and every actor in the legal process, from lawyers to judges, faces barriers to complete candor. For lawyers, truth competes with the duty to protect clients. Advocates may face situations where clients are evasive, facts are murky, or the pressure to win outweighs the drive for transparency. Judges are not immune either; inflated confidence in their own judgment can mask personal bias. Even law professors, who teach ethics, may compromise their own standards in pursuit of academic or ideological agendas. Lubet suggests that the profession too often accepts these compromises as inevitable rather than challenging them directly. Through historical and modern examples, Lubet shows how deception can backfire. Oscar Wilde's libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry ended in disgrace because Wilde concealed the truth from his own legal team. Rather than trusting his counsel, he tried to outwit the system with charm and deflection. The strategy collapsed under cross-examination, leading not only to the failure of his lawsuit but also to his own criminal conviction and ruin. Lubet contrasts this with Bill Clinton's evasive testimony, which had political consequences but allowed him to retain power—revealing how context and privilege can shape outcomes. Lubet also explores how honesty intersects with professional conduct outside courtrooms. He discusses a law student whose online nudity raised concerns about bar admission. Lubet argues that the real question is not about morality, but whether such behaviour predicts future misconduct. In contrast, a student's joke about mass violence after a tragedy presents a more serious issue. Lubet draws a line between expression that is merely controversial and conduct that hints at recklessness or dishonesty. Another story—about Lubet bargaining with horse guides in Petra—shows how markets, like law, are shaped by more than logic. Despite economic expectations, the guides refused to lower their prices. Their decisions were shaped not by supply and demand, but by pride, custom, and the value of dignity. Just as in law, truth in markets is not only about numbers; it is also about people and meaning. Lubet argues for greater realism and integrity. Lawyers must resist the temptation to hide behind abstract roles, like the so-called scrivener in joint representation. When representing multiple clients, disclosure of risks and open communication are essential. Only clients can weigh the danger of conflicts, and it is the lawyer's duty to inform them clearly. Honesty in law is a constant struggle, not a given. Lubet calls on the legal community to recognise its vulnerabilities—bias, secrecy, and selective truth—and meet them with a deliberate effort to act with candor, even in a system that thrives on contradiction and conflict. In the legal realm, absolute honesty is often less important than strategic persuasion, where navigating bias, uncertainty, and competing obligations can matter more than telling the unvarnished truth.

Symbolic fiction of culture

In 'The Dawn of Language: How We Came to Talk[407]' Sverker Johansson suggests that at the core of culture, language, and the symbolic life of Homo sapiens lies a shared commitment to useful fictions—abstract constructs that need not be true to function. Cultural man is sustained by 'lies that work': symbols, myths, and narratives that forge collective belief and enable coordination across large groups. A young woman sits outside a small hut, carefully applying red ochre to an ivory figurine. The carved object, rich in symbols, is not for trade or utility. It is meant to unlock her fertility with the help of a forest spirit. Scenes like this help illustrate what separates early humans from other animals. Chimpanzees and other apes may use tools and communicate, but they do not engage in symbolic expression or decoration. Early humans, in contrast, created art that went beyond survival. They carved, painted, and adorned

[407] Johansson, S. (2021) The Dawn of Language: How We Came to Talk. Translated by Frank Perry. London: Macmillan.

not because they had to, but because they could imagine meaning and beauty. Culture and language are both rooted in symbols. Words stand in for ideas. So do carved lines, painted surfaces, and ornamental objects. The mind that can handle such abstraction is what Sverker Johansson calls a 'symbol-ready' mind. This capability suggests that, even before spoken language was fully developed, humans could share ideas and emotions in nonverbal but meaningful ways. Archaeological evidence supports this. Early finds of decorated shells, coloured pigments, and sculpted items show that symbolic culture emerged long before writing or complex speech. The shift from functional tools to symbolic artefacts marks a turning point. Australopithecus and early Homo species left behind sharp stones meant to cut or scrape. Later, Homo erectus began creating hand axes that were too large to use, and collections of unusual stones that served no clear purpose. These objects may have been displayed, traded, or revered. The behaviour mirrors human habits of curating and attributing value to objects beyond their use. Later hominins, including Neandertals and Denisovans, used pigments, wore shells as ornaments, and carved figures. These items reflected abstract thought, belief, and the beginnings of language. For years, researchers focused on European sites like Lascaux, thinking symbolic culture began around 40,000 years ago. But discoveries in Africa and Asia reveal that symbolic behaviour is older and more widespread. Early humans and their cousins were crafting and expressing meaning in various ways for at least 200,000 years, more. The record now includes cave art in Indonesia, decorated bones in Africa, and carved figures in Siberia. Such finds suggest symbolic thought was not exclusive to one group or one time. It grew slowly and in parallel with other mental developments. Culture in this sense becomes a mirror of language readiness. If people could carve beliefs into ivory, they could speak of them too. Though we cannot recover the first sentences ever spoken, we can trace the minds that formed them. The earliest artefacts show intent, abstraction, and imagination. They are indirect but powerful clues that a form of protolanguage existed. Through ritual, decoration, and symbolism, early humans communicated ideas larger than themselves. These expressions of meaning laid the groundwork for the fully developed languages we speak today. Useful fictions—symbols, myths, and stories—can outlive their creators, shaping belief and behaviour for generations by working not through truth, but through the shared meaning they inspire.

Telling lies

Paul Ekman's 'Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit[408]' explores the subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—ways people deceive one another. He opens with two contrasting stories: Adolf Hitler, lying without remorse to Neville Chamberlain before invading Czechoslovakia, and 'Mary', a suicidal patient who lies to leave the hospital but cannot hide her inner despair. Hitler's cold calculation allowed his lies to remain undetected. Mary, on the other hand, leaked signals—slight facial expressions and restrained gestures—revealing her real emotions. These examples show that lies come in many forms, and not all are equally difficult to detect. A lie, as Ekman defines it, is a deliberate attempt to mislead someone without giving prior notice. This does not include errors, self-deception, or pretend performances in expected contexts like theater. Lies can take two major forms: concealment, where key information is left out, and falsification, where false information is inserted. Concealment is often easier and feels less morally wrong. But when pushed, liars must often falsify to protect the original lie. Concealing negative emotions is particularly challenging. Many people cover their true feelings with smiles because smiles are the easiest expression to fake and disarm suspicion. But some liars,

[408] Ekman, P. (2009) Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage. New York: W\.W. Norton.

especially skilled or emotionally distant ones, can even fake distress to manipulate others. Ekman notes that not all lies fail. Sometimes they succeed because the liar is composed or because the person being lied to prefers not to uncover the truth. Emotional turmoil increases the risk of failure. Micro-expressions—brief flashes of genuine emotion—can leak from the face. Voice tone, pauses, or mismatched gestures may also give clues. But these signs do not always appear. Successful liars can control or suppress them, and observers may lack the skill or will to notice. Still, Ekman's experiments show that when strong emotions are involved—shame, fear, guilt—leakage becomes harder to prevent. Not all deception is harmful. In personal relationships, people sometimes lie to protect loved ones or avoid unnecessary conflict. A spouse may hide an affair; a parent may soften a truth. Ekman does not take a moral stance against all lies. He acknowledges that polite fictions often smooth over daily life. However, the same mechanisms that allow white lies also enable manipulation in politics, business, and crime. The challenge lies in distinguishing compassion from exploitation. Ekman also warns against overconfidence in lie detection. Professionals—from police to doctors to politicians—sometimes rely on hunches or poorly tested methods. Although training in reading facial expressions and body language can help, it must be paired with humility and a grasp of emotional nuance. Knowing the type of lie, the liar's emotional state, and the stakes involved is key to assessing truthfulness. Ultimately, 'Telling Lies' reveals that human deception is complex and socially embedded. We live in a world where complete honesty and total deceit are both rare. Somewhere between, we manage our relationships, shield our vulnerabilities, and navigate truth's fragile terrain. Telling lies is ultimately the same as telling truths, because both rely on the same tools of language and expression to create a version of reality others are willing to accept.

Science Fictions

In 'Science Fictions Science Fictions: How Fraud, Bias, Negligence, and Hype Undermine the Search for Truth[409]', Stuart Ritchie investigates the ways fraud, bias, negligence, and media hype have undermined modern science. His starting point is a striking example: in 2011, psychologist Daryl Bem published a study claiming that students could predict future events. The experiment was peer-reviewed and appeared in a respected journal. But when Ritchie and colleagues tried to replicate the study, their results showed no such psychic ability. Still, their replication was rejected by journals, exposing a larger issue—replication, the cornerstone of scientific method, is often discouraged. Around the same time, another scandal unfolded. Diederik Stapel, a well-known Dutch psychologist, had fabricated data for years. Dozens of his papers, many published in prestigious outlets, were based on experiments that never happened. The academic system that should have caught this deceit not only failed but actively rewarded it. These examples reveal that systemic flaws—not just individual dishonesty—allow bad science to flourish. The crisis goes beyond psychology. In medicine, economics, neuroscience, and biology, replication often fails. Ritchie discusses how brain imaging software once produced widespread false positives, how popular behavioural theories like 'power posing' could not be reproduced, and how even major cancer studies collapsed under scrutiny. These failures are not isolated incidents but symptoms of deeper structural problems. One major factor is the reward system in science. Researchers are pressured to publish exciting results, and funding often depends on novelty, not accuracy. This creates incentives for questionable practices—selective reporting, p-hacking, and ignoring failed replications.

[409] Ritchie, S. (2020) Science Fictions: How Fraud, Bias, Negligence, and Hype Undermine the Search for Truth. London: Bodley Head.

Journals prefer eye-catching headlines, while null results rarely see the light of day. As Ritchie points out, studies that cannot be repeated have little value, yet they continue to influence policy, medicine, and education. Despite these problems, Ritchie does not argue that science is broken beyond repair. He emphasises the power of science as a self-correcting system—when its tools are used properly. He advocates for open data, transparent methods, preregistration of studies, and stronger replication efforts. He also supports 'meta-science', the study of how research is done, to identify and fix the system's weaknesses. Ultimately, Science Fictions is not an attack on science itself, but a call to reform it. It shows that peer review, replication, and transparency are not optional—they are essential. Without them, the scientific process becomes vulnerable to error, manipulation, and public mistrust. If researchers can be trained to value accuracy over fame, and if institutions reward careful work rather than sensationalism, then science can rebuild its credibility. Bias in science takes many forms. The 'tyranny of prior preference' remains a core problem: once people believe something, they often see only what confirms it and ignore what contradicts it. One of the most damaging is publication bias. Journals are more likely to print surprising or positive results than studies with null findings. This means that the scientific record can give a false sense of certainty or effect size. Researchers might run several experiments, publish the one that 'worked', and discard the rest. The public and other scientists then draw conclusions from incomplete data. The result is a literature built on half-truths. Science thrives not because it is perfect but because it has tools to correct itself. Those tools need to be used more often, and with more honesty. Only then can science begin to overcome the biases that cloud its judgment and fulfill its promise of uncovering the truth. Ritchie's message is clear: science remains one of humanity's greatest tools for understanding the world. But it must hold itself to higher standards if it is to retain public trust and truly advance knowledge. Lying in science is no different from everyday speech, because science is not a sacred realm apart from life but simply another domain of language, with all its flaws, biases, and failures.

Discourse and parrhesia

In his 1983 Berkeley lectures[410], Michel Foucault explored the ancient Greek concept of parrhesia—often translated as 'free speech'—and its importance in the history of truth-telling. Rather than viewing parrhesia as simply the right to speak, he emphasised its ethical and political significance. It is not just saying what one believes, but doing so with courage, especially when truth is dangerous or unwelcome. The word parrhesia first appears in Greek literature during the fifth century BCE, notably in Euripides, and continues to appear in later philosophical and Christian texts. Foucault traced its forms—noun, verb, and agent—and its evolution from civic expression in democratic Athens to a more introspective philosophical exercise. At its core, parrhesia means saying everything one honestly thinks. It requires openness, clarity, and a willingness to face consequences. Unlike rhetoric, which persuades through technique regardless of belief, parrhesia reveals the speaker's genuine convictions. It is not just expressive—it is risky. For Foucault, this danger is central. Parrhesia is not neutral. It creates a relationship of imbalance, often pitting a speaker against authority. A citizen criticising a ruler, a philosopher addressing a tyrant, or even someone confronting their own self-deception—each case involves risk. The parrhesiastes does not protect themselves with flattery or ambiguity. Their strength lies in a duty to truth, not in institutional power. The contrast with modern truth-telling is striking. In the Cartesian tradition, truth must be

[410] Foucault, M. (2001) Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia. Six lectures given at the University of California, Berkeley, 1983. Ed. J. Pearson. Northwestern University.

established with certainty and proof. For the ancients, parrhesia depended on moral integrity. A person's character determined their access to and ability to express truth. This shift reflects broader transformations in how societies understand knowledge and responsibility. Foucault examined how parrhesia intersected with politics, rhetoric, and philosophy. In democratic Athens, it was vital for public debate and civic life. But under monarchies, its role narrowed to advisors speaking frankly to rulers—if they dared. Philosophers like Socrates took parrhesia into the personal realm, asking others—and themselves—hard questions. Truth-telling became a way of life, not just a form of speech. Later, the Epicureans institutionalised it within their communities as mutual critique aimed at ethical progress. Parrhesia declined as public life changed. Rhetoric absorbed its language but lost its soul. Speaking freely became a performance rather than a duty. Foucault saw this not as a loss of liberty alone but as a loss of the ethical relationship between truth, speaker, and listener. In Foucault's reading, parrhesia is not nostalgic—it is a call to examine how power, risk, and speech continue to interact. He did not idealise the past, but he did suggest that modern societies could relearn from these ancient practices. The point is not to restore old forms but to recognise how truth-telling always demands courage. The Greeks began to treat parrhesia as something that needed regulation and ethical consideration. In Socratic and Platonic thought, the question became not just who speaks, but how one earns the right to be heard. This concern with the moral standing of the truth-teller gave rise to the critical spirit in Western philosophy. Parrhesia, then, becomes more than speech. It is a practice of courage, of responsibility, and of transformation. As both a personal and social activity, it offers a model for ethical living rooted in truthfulness, reflection, and care for the self and others. Foucault's analysis shows how parrhesia evolved from a democratic necessity into a philosophical and moral practice. It reflected the changing nature of truth and power—where the right to speak carried risks, and speaking truth became an ethical stance rather than a political guarantee. The legacy of parrhesia lies in its insistence that truth requires both courage and a community willing to hear it. Parrhesia makes the bond between language and reality—especially the concrete reality of one's own land and tribe—more important than life itself. What you dare to say with your name, in your place, before your people, is who you are, and the only thing that truly matters.

Neural pathways of deceit and irony

In the study 'Neural Correlates Underlying the Comprehension of Deceitful and Ironic Communicative Intentions[411]' by Francesca M. Bosco and colleagues investigates how the brain processes complex social meanings such as deceit and irony. Using neuroimaging, the researchers identify distinct neural pathways involved in understanding communicative intentions that deviate from literal meaning, highlighting the cognitive demands of interpreting non-literal language. Understanding language is more than decoding words. It involves grasping the speaker's intent, especially when that intent is hidden behind irony or deception. Bosco and her colleagues explore how the brain processes such indirect forms of communication. They look closely at the neural systems involved in understanding irony and deceit, showing that different types of nonliteral speech rely on different mental and neural resources. To comprehend irony or deception, one must move beyond the literal meaning and consider context, beliefs, and motives. This requires theory of mind—the ability to attribute

[411] Bosco, F.M., Parola, A., Valentini, M.C. and Morese, R. (2017). Neural correlates underlying the comprehension of deceitful and ironic communicative intentions. Cortex, 94, pp.73–86. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2017.06.010.

mental states to others. When someone says something ironic, listeners must understand that the speaker means the opposite of what is said, often to highlight a flaw or express sarcasm. When someone lies, the goal is to mislead. Both types of communication manipulate expectations, but their intentions diverge sharply. The study used functional MRI to examine the brain's activity while participants listened to short stories involving irony, lies, or literal statements. The results showed that while some brain regions are commonly activated by both irony and deception, others differ. Shared regions include the medial prefrontal cortex and temporo-parietal junction—areas associated with theory of mind. These areas help us infer others' thoughts, a skill essential for interpreting nonliteral language. However, irony activates the right superior temporal sulcus and inferior frontal gyrus more strongly, indicating a need to process unexpected or incongruous meanings. Deception, on the other hand, involves more activity in regions tied to executive function, such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. This reflects the cognitive load of holding conflicting representations in mind and suppressing the literal interpretation. This suggests that irony may be more socially nuanced, involving humour and criticism, while deception involves more effortful control and planning. The different neural pathways show that the brain handles these two communicative strategies with distinct but overlapping mechanisms. Understanding a lie involves managing conflicting knowledge and motives. Irony, though indirect, often assumes a shared understanding between speaker and listener. Deceit, by contrast, thrives on hiding intent. The study also notes that emotional engagement differs between the two. Irony, especially when humorous, can elicit positive social bonding, while deceit often evokes distrust or vigilance. The listener's brain must navigate these emotional cues as well, highlighting how closely tied language is to social and emotional intelligence. In daily life, humans constantly interpret veiled meanings. Whether detecting sarcasm or spotting a lie, these skills are vital to navigating social interactions. This study shows how the brain juggles these tasks using specific cognitive and emotional circuits, offering insights into disorders where such interpretation fails, such as autism or schizophrenia. The investigation of how humans deceive themselves, distort truth, and obscure intention is inherently fraught, as even the research process itself may be influenced by "deceitful and ironic communicative intentions," thereby obscuring the very phenomena it aims to illuminate.

Logic made easy

In 'Logic Made Easy[412]', Deborah J. Bennett opens with a sharp observation: logic is not as common as many believe. Most people assume they think logically, but often what passes for reasoning is shaped by habit, bias, or confusion. From the start, the book questions this assumption, arguing that genuine logical thinking is rare and difficult, even among educated adults. Instead of offering a dry manual of rules or technical jargon, Bennett explains why humans struggle with logic, despite its importance in daily life. People expect the world to make sense. From a young age, children ask questions and want explanations. As adults, the expectation for reasoned thought continues in relationships, work, and public discourse. Yet even in professional environments, flawed arguments and logical fallacies are widespread. Bennett explores why that gap exists. The problem is not that people are incapable of logic, but that logical thinking requires effort, awareness, and training—things most people have not practiced deliberately. Logical errors are not just academic problems. They appear in casual conversation, courtroom trials, scientific claims, advertising, and politics. In each case, understanding what follows logically from given information can prevent deception and misunderstanding. Yet, as cognitive psychology shows, people often fall for misleading

[412] Bennett, D. J. (2004) Logic Made Easy: How to Know When Language Deceives You. Norton.

reasoning. Experiments by researchers like Peter Wason reveal that even intelligent individuals routinely make predictable logical mistakes. The book also traces logic's historical development to show how the field evolved and why it remains essential. Starting with the Greeks, especially Aristotle, logic was seen as a foundation for sound reasoning. Aristotle laid out rules for valid arguments using propositions and conclusions, setting the tone for future generations. Later, thinkers like Leibniz dreamt of reducing argument to a universal language. His ideas, though largely ignored in his lifetime, were later developed into symbolic logic by George Boole. Boole's system now forms the basis for modern computer logic and programming. Despite centuries of study and formalisation, humans continue to struggle with basic reasoning. Bennett suggests that part of the difficulty lies in how our minds process information. We often add irrelevant details, ignore key facts, or draw conclusions based on incomplete thoughts. These errors stem not from stupidity, but from how human cognition evolved—to make fast, sometimes intuitive decisions, not necessarily logical ones. Logic, then, is not just a matter of intelligence, but of discipline. Professions that demand clear thinking—medicine, law, science, engineering—all rely on the ability to separate what is known from what is assumed, and to test conclusions against rules of inference. This is also true in everyday life: knowing when a statement truly follows from evidence, or when it merely sounds convincing, is a vital skill. In the end, Bennett's message is both simple and profound. Logic matters because it helps people make better decisions and protects them from being misled. But logic must be learnt, practiced, and consciously applied. It is not just an abstract subject for philosophers or mathematicians. It is a tool for anyone who wants to think clearly in a confusing world. Cognitive research confirms that logical errors often spring from the tension between formal rules and natural speech. People use rough reasoning shortcuts instead of precise inferences. Humans, unlike machines, rely on commonsense background knowledge. This gives human thinking flexibility but also makes it more prone to error. The challenge is not a lack of logic, but the complexity of applying it through language. Formal logic demands clear structure, while human speech thrives on nuance. To think clearly, one must be aware of both—the logic underneath and the language through which it is expressed. Logic can serve deception as readily as it can serve truth, because it is not inherently tied to morality but shaped by linguistic stereotypes. When detached from ethical grounding, logical reasoning becomes a tool that can justify almost anything, however false or destructive.

1.3. Linguistics of lying

(The hidden syntax of lying: How deception lives in form, not just content)

'The essence of the lie implies, in fact, that the liar is actually in complete possession of the truth'.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness

'Lying is not a linguistic anomaly; it is a grammatical option embedded in every language'.

— Timothy R. Levine, Duped

Linguistics of lying

Lying is not just a moral issue or a psychological act—it is deeply rooted in how people use language. In 'The Linguistics of Lying[413]' Jörg Meibauer explores this idea by showing that lying is not simply a matter of saying something false. It is a subtle manipulation of language structures, from grammar and syntax to prosody and pragmatics. His work offers a wide-ranging linguistic account of how lies are constructed, recognised, and understood. At its core, lying involves intention. A person who lies must believe what they say is false and must want someone else to accept it as true. But how this intention plays out in language is more complex. It is not always about using clear declarative sentences. The sentence structure can be crafted to imply things without explicitly stating them, giving liars more flexibility. Semantically, lying sits between truth and intention. Traditional definitions focus on whether the speaker believes what they are saying is false. But studies suggest that listeners often judge a lie by whether it is objectively false, not by the speaker's belief. People also lie with varying degrees of precision, using modifiers like 'maybe' or 'probably' to blur responsibility. These linguistic hedges make the lie harder to detect. Pragmatically, lies challenge the basic rules of cooperative conversation. They violate what philosopher H. P. Grice called the Maxim of Quality—do not say what you believe to be false. But deception can also arise through implicature: a speaker might not state something false, but their phrasing invites a misleading inference. Sarcasm, metaphor, and irony can all contribute to deception without overt lying. Children start lying around age four, which coincides with the development of the theory of mind—the ability to understand that others have beliefs different from one's own. Culturally, lying serves different roles; in some societies, it can be used for harmony or politeness. Neurologically, lying taps into brain regions involved in control and inhibition, though these areas are not exclusive to deception. In short, lying is woven into the very structure of language. It is not a glitch in the system but a function of how language works—how meaning is shaped, implied, and understood. Words do not merely describe the world—they direct attention, establish salience, and set expectations. They create patterns of perception and habitual responses. This makes language a powerful tool for shaping not only external coordination but internal reasoning. 'The Linguistics of Lying' explores the many ways how lying is making sense. Sense making begins when something catches us off guard. An expectation is violated. We pause, notice, and try to explain what just happened. It is no surprise that stories, even simple ones, help people bond and reaffirm shared values. Gossip is the social glue of human groups. It is more than idle chatter. It teaches rules, manages reputations, and keeps communities together. Language does not only explain—it also frames. Language acts like a compass in social life, pointing out who is in, who is out, and how much one belongs. Reputation is built through stories. That is why storytelling is not just personal. It plays a role in the structure of society. It defines the circles of trust and obligation that keep communities functioning. Sense making, then, is not just a private act. It is a collective one. People use language to make sense of their place in the world and to help others do the same. Stories, greetings, jokes, and even corrections form part of a continuous process of social orientation. They are the signs by which humans navigate the complex networks they live in. Lying, as Jörg Meibauer suggests, is not simply a moral failure but a form of sense making—an everyday tool for navigating social expectations, managing impressions, and preserving relationships. In many situations, deception serves communication more effectively than strict truthfulness, helping to smooth interactions, protect feelings, or maintain social order. Because

[413] Meibauer, J. (2018) The Linguistics of Lying. Annual Review of Linguistics, 4, pp. 357–375.

of this pragmatic function, lying is deeply woven into the fabric of ordinary language, not as an exception but as a pervasive and often necessary strategy in human communication.

The devil wins

In 'The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment[414]' Dallas G. Denery II examines the subtle yet profound ways in which deception, moral failure, and spiritual compromise infiltrate modern life, revealing how adversarial forces can triumph through seemingly small, everyday choices. In Dante's Inferno, the eighth circle of hell, Malebolge, is home to liars, fraudsters, and deceivers. It is a world of twisting valleys and grotesque punishments—flatterers swim through excrement, hypocrites wear gilded cloaks filled with lead, and traitors are frozen in ice. The further Dante and Virgil descend, the more severe the deceit and the punishment. But the question that haunts these pages is not about justice. It is deeper: is it ever acceptable to lie? The history of this question is long and full of contradictions. In the Christian tradition, lying has often been considered an absolute moral failure. Augustine of Hippo condemned all lies without exception, arguing that deception disrupts divine truth. The Fall itself—humanity's first act of disobedience—was, after all, born of a lie. In this theology, to lie is to deny God. But as time passed, that moral certainty began to fracture. During the Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli argued that in a corrupt world, honesty might be a luxury one cannot afford. For rulers to survive, he suggested, they must learn to lie well. Power and politics demanded cunning. A prince must be both lion and fox. Lying, in this view, was not a sin but a tool. As society became more complex, the moral contours of deception shifted again. In early modern Europe, the art of court life depended on masks—on coded speech, polite fictions, and strategic lies. To succeed, courtiers had to conceal their thoughts, flatter superiors, and bend the truth as needed. This was not just tolerated. It was expected. Lying became a necessary part of social life. Women, too, were caught in the web of deceit—often unfairly. For centuries, they were accused of being naturally deceptive, a stereotype drawn from ancient medical texts and religious suspicion. But writers like Christine de Pizan and Madeleine de Scudéry pushed back. They argued that if women deceived, it was not because of nature, but necessity. In a patriarchal world, deception could be a form of self-defence, a means of survival, and even a way to preserve social peace. Lying, then, is not just a sin or a tactic. It is a window into how people live together—how they navigate fear, power, love, and shame. Even the Devil, in Christian thought, seduces with lies. But it is not always the Devil who wins. Sometimes, deception is the fragile bridge between chaos and order, between truth and survival.

Designed to deceive ourselves

In 'Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit[415]', Ian Leslie argues that dishonesty is not a moral failing but an evolutionary necessity, woven into the fabric of human interaction and essential for social cohesion. He argues that we are designed to deceive not only others but also ourselves suggesting that self-deception plays a vital role in maintaining identity, motivation, and mental stability. Lying, in this view, is less a moral anomaly than a psychological mechanism that allows humans to function within complex social systems. Henry Jekyll's confession in Stevenson's story of dual identity captures something fundamental about human nature. People often split themselves in two—not just morally, but perceptually. Modern

[414] Denery, D. G. (2015) The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment. Princeton University Press.
[415] Leslie, I. (2011) Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit. Quercus.

neuroscience confirms this. Our minds do not merely reflect reality; they invent it. The act of seeing, hearing, or feeling is not passive. It is a process full of assumptions, edits, and illusions. David Eagleman, a neuroscientist, describes perception as a kind of narrative construction. The brain constantly fills in gaps to create a seamless experience. What seems like unbroken, detailed awareness is a careful fiction. Even basic sight is stitched together from fragments, with the brain guessing what is in the blind spots or between eye movements. This is where deception begins—not with language, but with vision itself. Michael Gazzaniga's work with split-brain patients brought this further into focus. After surgery that severed the connection between the brain's hemispheres, patients showed something strange. When each half of the brain was shown a different image, the left hemisphere—responsible for speech—made up explanations for behaviour it did not initiate. It had no access to what the right hemisphere had seen, yet it produced confident stories. Gazzaniga called this the 'interpreter'. This part of the brain makes sense of things, even when the facts are missing. It lies to protect the feeling of being a unified self. This is not just a medical curiosity. Every person confabulates in daily life. When people are asked why they made a choice, they often invent a reason after the fact. The explanation feels true, but it is just a guess. In a classic experiment, subjects preferred one photograph over another, then were handed the photo they did not choose—and did not notice. They still defended it as their choice. The mind values coherence more than accuracy. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance explains why. When beliefs and actions conflict, people feel mental discomfort. To ease this, they adjust one or the other—often changing their memory or beliefs. This is why people cling to false predictions, why cult members stay after failed prophecies, and why someone will keep defending a bad decision. The alternative—admitting error—is more painful than believing a lie. This inner deception is not limited to the individual. Society encourages it. People tell small lies to seem kind, confident, or competent. These deceptions help maintain relationships and reputations. This tendency is so embedded that it shapes how people see themselves. Over time, the line between who one is and who one pretends to be blurs. People internalise the stories they tell others. Self-deception becomes identity. In evolutionary terms, this makes sense. In complex societies, the ability to lie, to guess others' thoughts, and to manage appearances can be the difference between acceptance and rejection. The brain evolved to navigate these pressures, even if it means bending reality. Self-deception helps people move forward, stay sane, and fit in. If, as "Born Liars" suggests, deception is essential to both survival and identity, can humans ever truly separate who they are from the lies they live by?

Does truth matter?

In 'Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space[416]', Ronald Geenens and Raoul Tinnevelt compile essays that critically examine the role of truth in democratic life and public discourse. The collection explores how the erosion of universal truths impacts democratic decision-making, public engagement, and the legitimacy of collective institutions. Truth has always been a contested concept in political thought. In democracies, it plays a strange double role—necessary for deliberation yet often subordinated to power. The essays collected in Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space, edited by Raf Geenens, explore how truth and public discourse shape modern democratic life. They reveal that the search for truth in politics is not simply about facts but about the structures that allow or suppress those facts. Public space is more than a physical setting. It is also an arena where citizens engage in political debate.

[416] Geenens, R. and Tinnevelt, R. (eds) (2015) Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space. Springer.

Following ancient Greek ideas of the oikos, agora, and ekklesia, the editors show how democratic life requires both physical gathering places and conceptual arenas where truth can be pursued. Hannah Arendt viewed this space as essential for freedom—where people act, speak, and confront reality. Jürgen Habermas argued that public spaces, such as salons and cafés, once fostered rational discussion, a tradition eroded by modern commercialisation and digital fragmentation. But can truth really guide political life? Arendt admitted truth is often powerless in politics. Plato demanded that truth rule through philosopher-kings, but democratic thinkers like John Rawls warn that no single truth should dominate in pluralistic societies. Instead, democracy should rely on reasonable dialogue, even among those who disagree. Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse suggest that the democratic process itself is a truth-seeking activity. Argumentation, justification, and accountability are not distractions from politics—they are its foundation. Still, good debate does not happen automatically. Institutions must be designed to encourage fairness, inclusivity, and critical thinking. The popular idea that a free marketplace of ideas will naturally lead to truth is misleading. Like a city needing roads and public squares, public discourse needs rules and structures. Matthew Festenstein emphasises the role of trust, while Glen Newey warns that democracy will always involve illusion. Political actors use language strategically, and even good citizens can be misled. Physical space matters too. As Bart Verschaffel argues, shrinking public spaces weaken democratic engagement. Without places to gather, protest, and talk face-to-face, citizens lose the habit of public life. John Parkinson notes that digital forums do not fully replace physical presence. Real human encounters—where people hear tone, see gestures, and face one another—are harder to manipulate than online conversations. Truth also intersects with political legitimacy. David Estlund's theory of epistemic proceduralism suggests that democracy is not just fair—it has knowledge-producing value. Even if decisions are flawed, they emerge from a system that encourages reasoning and correction. Expert knowledge matters, but democratic legitimacy does not depend on experts ruling. Instead, it depends on a process open to revision, grounded in moral equality, and capable of learning over time. Philippe Raynaud highlights the ongoing conflict between power and truth. Hobbes claimed that law stems from authority, not morality. Later thinkers, like Hans Kelsen, turned this into procedural democracy—law as a system of rules, not values. Yet Tocqueville feared that when democratic majorities suppress dissent, they also suppress truth. A system without room for disagreement is a system without learning. In the end, truth matters—but only if institutions make space for it. Democracy must protect the freedom to speak, question, and revise. Without that, it becomes a hollow form, where power replaces persuasion and conformity replaces understanding. If democracy depends less on finding absolute truth than on sustaining the pretence of searching for it, does truth matter—or is it the performance of that search that keeps democratic life alive?

Truth and trust

In 'Truth and Trust in Democratic Epistemology[417]' Matthew Festenstein explores how democracy can be understood as an epistemic system—not just a way of counting votes, but as a method for generating better political judgments through open inquiry. Drawing from pragmatist thinkers like John Dewey, he argues that democracy functions as a process of organised intelligence, where deliberation, dissent, and public reasoning help refine beliefs over time. This view depends on fallibilism—the idea that no belief is beyond challenge. It is not that democracy discovers ultimate truths, but that it creates conditions under which truth can be

[417] Festenstein, M. (2015) 'Truth and Trust in Democratic Epistemology' in Geenens, R. and Tinnevelt, R. (eds) Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space. Springer.

approached more responsibly. In this framework, truth emerges through contestation. Citizens must be willing to have their beliefs tested and, if necessary, revised. For democracy to work as a truth-seeking system, institutions must support disagreement and allow for correction. Mechanisms like a free press, public inquiries, and deliberative forums are not just safeguards of liberty—they are essential to truth. Cheryl Misak and others suggest that democratic legitimacy grows from this capacity to test claims considering shared experience and collective reasoning, not from majority opinion alone. But democratic knowledge is rarely the result of personal investigation. Most people form political views based on information from others. This reliance on expert testimony raises the question of trust. Citizens must judge not only the content of claims but the credibility of those making them. Yet, as Mark Warren notes, politics naturally breeds distrust. Conflicting interests, power struggles, and strategic behaviour create incentives to mislead. In this environment, trust must be earned rather than assumed. Festenstein argues that a well-functioning democracy needs institutions that build credibility through transparency and responsiveness. Courts, citizen juries, and investigative journalism are examples of spaces where claims are publicly tested, and speakers are held accountable. These are not perfect systems, but they allow people to evaluate both arguments and arguers. A free press, for instance, is not simply a provider of facts—it acts as a filter and a stage where competing perspectives can be judged. Yet democracy's epistemic promise is fragile. It depends on citizens and leaders alike practicing certain virtues: openness to criticism, willingness to revise one's views, and the ability to listen across disagreement. When some engage sincerely while others pursue only strategic gain, the system is distorted. Truth-seeking gives way to manipulation. The risk is not just bad outcomes, but a loss of faith in deliberation itself. Even if democracy does not guarantee truth, it can be a better method of inquiry than rule by experts or authority. But this requires both strong institutions and a civic culture committed to reasoning, not just winning. Democratic knowledge is always provisional, always contested, and always shaped by the people willing to take part in its making.

Falsifiability

Karl Popper introduced falsifiability to draw the line between science and non-science. He argued that a theory is scientific if it can be proven false in principle. This idea appears in his book 'The Logic of Scientific Discovery[418]'. For Popper, it was not enough for a theory to make predictions or seem reasonable—it had to be testable in a way that allowed it to fail. This emphasis on risk, on putting theories at stake, was central to his vision of how science should work. Popper noticed a major problem in how people try to confirm theories. If one sees a thousand white swans, it might feel safe to say all swans are white. But that is not logically sound. One black swan is all it takes to refute the claim. From this, Popper concluded that science does not grow by confirming ideas but by trying to break them. Strong theories should make bold claims—ones that could turn out to be wrong. This approach helped tackle the demarcation problem: how to tell science apart from pseudoscience. Popper's answer was that science makes falsifiable claims; pseudoscience does not. He was especially critical of theories that explained everything but predicted nothing. If no evidence can disprove a claim, then it does not belong in the scientific realm. Some philosophers, like Pierre Duhem and W\.V.O. Quine, pointed out that no test happens in a vacuum. Observations depend on other assumptions, so it is hard to isolate one theory for blame when an experiment fails. Popper acknowledged this, but insisted that his criterion was logical, not practical. The point was not that science always works in clean lab conditions—it was that theories must say something concrete enough

[418] Popper, K. (2002) The Logic of Scientific Discovery. Routledge.

to risk being wrong. To formalise this, Popper introduced the idea of basic statements—specific observations like 'this swan is black'. A good theory sorts these into ones it allows and ones it forbids. A single forbidden observation undermines the theory. Later developments in logic, like model theory, gave this idea a sharper edge by showing how theories could be invalidated across worlds. Falsifiability does not mean a theory has to be rejected at the first sign of trouble. In practice, anomalies often prompt revisions or better measurements. But Popper insisted that scientists should always be prepared to give up their theories if the evidence no longer fits. Scientific integrity depends on this openness to failure. In the real world, falsifiability has had broader influence. Courts have used it to decide what counts as scientific testimony. In cases like Daubert v. Merrell Dow, judges leaned on Popper's idea to separate evidence-based science from belief-driven claims. Still, falsifiability has limits. Some theories evolve to fit new data, and others seem too vague to be tested at all. But even with its flaws, Popper's idea continues to guide how people think about science—as a method of asking difficult questions and remaining willing to be proven wrong. Falsifiability, as Popper conceived it, relies on language to draw sharp distinctions between what can be meaningfully questioned and what cannot—requiring statements clear and precise enough to risk being disproven. Lying, by contrast, often thrives in the absence of falsifiability: it uses ambiguous or unverifiable language to evade exposure and maintain plausible deniability. In this way, falsifiability and lying mark two opposing uses of language—one grounded in the courage to be proven wrong, the other in the manipulation of truth through strategic ambiguity and concealment. Lying is often more invested in truth—or at least its appearance—than science, which, bound by falsifiability, must even question itself, while a critical attitude toward every authority remains its core moral and logical duty.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the circular relationships between knowledge, belief, and behaviour. In both epistemology and sociology, it describes how ideas and actions feed back into each other, shaping not only society but the thinkers themselves. When beliefs cause outcomes that reinforce those beliefs, reflexivity becomes a kind of self-fulfilling loop. This idea grows more complex when religion or ideology enters the picture, as faith-based systems often resist contradiction. In a broader sense, reflexivity is about self-reference. It shows how people, through thought and analysis, can reshape their own habits, values, and identities. In the social sciences, reflexivity becomes a methodological concern. Theories about behaviour must also account for the people making those theories. For example, sociologists studying belief systems must recognise that their own thinking is shaped by similar forces. This becomes particularly clear when the act of observation changes the behaviour being observed. A fieldworker living among a remote group inevitably affects that group's culture just by being there. Reflexivity, then, shares something with the observer effect from physics. In fields like the sociology of science, this awareness becomes essential. Researchers are expected to apply the same critical tools to their own work as they do to their subjects. The idea dates to William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, who said that if people define situations as real, their consequences are real. Robert Merton expanded this into the self-fulfilling prophecy, where expectations shape reality. Karl Popper discussed something similar with his 'Oedipus effect'—a prediction that causes itself to become true. He also noted that these loops show up in biology and other sciences. Later, economists like George Soros used the idea to explain markets. Rising prices attract buyers, which raises prices even more. Eventually, the trend reverses and crashes. These feedback loops defy traditional economic models that assume markets are rational and self-correcting. Sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu explored how reflexivity

shapes identity. Giddens argued that in modern societies, people must constantly reflect on their choices, since stable traditions no longer guide life. Bourdieu pushed for researchers to be critically aware of their own biases. Michel Foucault added another layer, showing how systems of thought define the very subject doing the thinking. In anthropology, reflexivity means recognising the scholar's power over how other cultures are portrayed. It also refers to cultural self-awareness—rituals, performances, and stories that turn a society's gaze back on itself. In international relations, reflexivity has become central to post-positivist approaches. It means acknowledging one's own assumptions, questioning dominant narratives, and understanding that knowledge is always produced from a particular position. Scholars like Patrick Thaddeus Jackson see it as a foundation for critical methodology. Reflexivity challenges the idea that social science can operate like physics. People think, reflect, and change in response to being studied. This makes the social world unstable and hard to predict. Still, researchers now use structured tools—like Audrey Alejandro's reflexive discourse analysis—to navigate this complexity and produce more honest, adaptable knowledge. Reflexivity is deeply tied to language, as it is through language that people interpret, narrate, and reshape their own beliefs and actions. Lying, as a form of reflexive speech, reveals this connection: it is not merely distortion, but a strategic use of language to manage perception—often of the self as much as of others. In this sense, reflexivity and lying are both linguistic tools through which individuals navigate social reality, continuously constructing and adjusting their identities within a web of meanings, expectations, and self-deceptions.

Double hermeneutic

The concept of the double hermeneutic, introduced by Anthony Giddens[419], captures a defining feature of the social sciences: the two-way relationship between scientific theories and everyday understanding. In this view, social science is not simply an external observer of society. It is also a participant. Its categories and explanations do not remain confined to academic texts. They seep into daily language and reshape how people see themselves and their world. A good example is 'social class'. Once a technical concept, it now shapes how individuals describe their status, aspirations, and identity. Giddens contrasts this with what he calls the 'single hermeneutic' of the natural sciences. Physicists may interpret the behaviour of atoms or gravity, but those forces do not respond or change their course based on those interpretations. In contrast, humans do. When people learn about sociological theories or economic models, they may adjust their behaviour or decisions. This means the object of study—the social world—is constantly evolving considering the theories designed to explain it. This feedback loop gives the social sciences a unique challenge. The categories they use are not static. They change as people learn them, adapt them, and use them to guide action. Giddens argues that this process is not just incidental. It is central to what makes social science distinct. It is not enough to interpret human behaviour. One must also consider how those interpretations become part of the behaviour itself. The double hermeneutic is not just a methodological insight. It also raises deeper questions about the nature of social reality. Some scholars, like Dimitri Ginev, draw a line between two approaches to the concept. One sees it as a method for studying human behaviour—a way of understanding how meaning circulates between theorist and subject. The other sees it as an ontological claim. In this view, the social world is fundamentally shaped by how it is understood. Knowledge does not merely describe society. It helps to build it. This perspective opens a space for critical reflection. If theories reshape the world, then researchers must take responsibility for how their ideas are used. Categories like 'race', 'gender', or

[419] Giddens, A. (1982) Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory. Macmillan.

'deviance' are not neutral. Once adopted into public discourse, they can reinforce stereotypes or influence policy. The line between analysis and intervention becomes blurred. Giddens's idea of the double hermeneutic offers more than an abstract theory. It explains why social science has such a visible impact on society, and why that impact can be both empowering and dangerous. The very act of understanding people changes them. That is what makes the social sciences different—and what makes them so difficult to practice responsibly.

Goodhart's Law

Goodhart's Law states that when a measure becomes a target, it stops being a good measure. Charles Goodhart[420] first expressed this idea in 1975 in the context of British monetary policy. At the time, governments tried to control the economy by targeting indicators like the money supply. But Goodhart pointed out that once these indicators were used to shape policy, they became unreliable. People adjusted their behaviour to hit the targets without achieving the underlying goals. The very act of using a measure to control something changed the nature of the measure itself. The basic insight is simple but powerful. People respond to incentives. When a specific number or metric is used to judge success, individuals and institutions find ways to game the system. The more pressure there is to meet the target, the more likely it is that the original purpose of the measure will be lost. What starts as a helpful tool for understanding a system becomes a rigid and misleading guide. Though the law bears Goodhart's name, similar warnings came earlier. In the late 1960s, Donald T. Campbell warned that social indicators used in policymaking are prone to corruption. The more they matter, the less they reflect reality. Jerome Ravetz showed how complex goals get reduced to narrow indicators, which experts can manipulate for personal or institutional gain. Robert Lucas added to this picture in 1976 with his critique of macroeconomic modeling. He argued that once people understand the rules, they adapt, and the old models no longer work. In recent years, the reach of Goodhart's Law has grown. Scholars apply it to education, science, business, and government. When schools are judged by test scores, teachers teach to the test. When scientists are judged by citations, they focus on publishable work rather than meaningful research. In finance, using risk models for regulation can lead to systemic blind spots. In each case, the measure loses its value once it becomes the goal. The law reflects a deeper tension in modern governance. Performance must be monitored, but the tools used to do so can distort behaviour. Metrics give an appearance of objectivity, but they shape the actions they are meant to observe. This makes accountability both necessary and dangerous. A measure can illuminate or mislead depending on how it is used. Understanding Goodhart's Law is essential for policy design. It reminds us that no metric is neutral. All are shaped by context and human response. Effective oversight depends not just on setting targets, but on recognising how targets change behaviour. It also calls for humility. Systems are complex, and measures are only ever partial views. The lesson is not to reject metrics entirely, but to use them with care. Measures should guide inquiry, not dictate action. When used too rigidly, they lose their purpose. When treated as tools rather than truths, they can still serve. But only if we remember that every metric is also a mirror—and it changes when we look too hard.

[420] Goodhart, C. (1975) 'Problems of Monetary Management: The U.K. Experience', in Papers in Monetary Economics, Vol. 1. Sydney: Reserve Bank of Australia.

Campbell's Law

Campbell's law is a warning about what happens when metrics meant to monitor progress become the very goals of policy. Donald T. Campbell[421], a psychologist and social scientist, saw the danger in overrelying on quantitative indicators. He famously wrote that the more a numerical measure is used in decision-making, the more likely it is to be corrupted—and the more it will distort the system it was designed to observe. This principle can be seen across many areas of society. When organisations or governments use a single number to determine success, they create strong incentives to game the system. As attention shifts toward improving that number, other important aspects of performance often suffer. In trying to improve what is measured, people can end up destroying what matters. Education provides one of the clearest examples. Standardised tests were originally introduced to provide an objective view of student learning and school performance. But as test results became central to funding, evaluation, and public rankings, teachers and administrators began to change their behaviour. Instead of offering a broad education, they focused narrowly on what would appear on the tests. Some schools even resorted to cheating scandals to boost scores. The tests stopped being tools for insight and became obstacles to real learning. Campbell noted this pattern in the 1970s. Since then, it has only grown. Policymakers often turn to data in search of objectivity. They want to show progress, demonstrate efficiency, and justify their decisions. But once data becomes the main basis for judgment, it becomes a target. People adjust their actions not to improve outcomes, but to improve numbers. Other researchers have expanded on Campbell's insight. Goodhart's law, which focuses on economics and finance, offers a similar warning: any statistical regularity will break down when used as a control mechanism. The Lucas critique points out that economic models can fail when people adapt their behaviour in response to policy rules. Both echo Campbell's central message—when people know how they are being measured, they often find ways to manipulate the system. This problem is not about bad actors. Even well-meaning individuals can get caught in a cycle where they feel pressured to meet benchmarks, even if it means cutting corners. The trouble lies in treating metrics as reality rather than rough indicators. As Rebecca Boden and Debbie Epstein argued, when research is designed to support existing policies, it becomes less about discovery and more about justification. Evidence-based policymaking turns into policy-based evidence. Campbell's law serves as a reminder that data is not neutral. It shapes actions and expectations. When numbers rule decisions, they tend to warp what they were meant to represent. To avoid this, policymakers and institutions must remain critical of the tools they use. Qualitative insights, local knowledge, and diverse perspectives are essential for balance.

The Hawthorne effect

The Hawthorne effect refers to a change in people's behaviour when they know they are being watched. The idea came from a series of experiments conducted at the Hawthorne Works, a factory near Chicago, during the 1920s and 1930s. Although these studies[422] have been widely debated and reinterpreted, the basic idea—that observation alone can influence behaviour—has remained influential in psychology and social science. The original studies aimed to test how changes in working conditions affected productivity. The first was the so-called illumination study, which adjusted light levels for workers. Strangely, productivity increased whether the lighting was turned up or down. Only when lights were dimmed to near darkness did output

[421] Campbell, D.T. (1976) 'Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change', Occasional Paper Series, Paper #8, The Public Affairs Center, Dartmouth College.
[422] Mayo, E. (1933) The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization. New York: Macmillan.

drop. This puzzled researchers. They began to suspect that the improvements were not caused by light at all, but by something else—the feeling of being studied. Later experiments focused on a small group of women assembling electrical parts. Their breaks were changed, snacks were provided, hours shortened, and conditions altered. No matter what the change was, their productivity rose. Even reverting to old conditions produced gains. The women were being watched closely, and researchers began to believe that their sense of being special and treated with interest boosted morale and output. In a mass interviewing project that followed, thousands of workers were asked about their thoughts on work. As the interviews became more open-ended and conversational, researchers noticed that workers often responded based on group expectations, not just individual opinion. This hinted at the powerful influence of social norms. The final study, the bank wiring room experiment, looked at men working on a group-based payment system. Strikingly, productivity did not rise. Workers held back because they feared higher output would result in reduced pay rates. Informal group rules and peer pressure seemed stronger than financial incentives. This was a turning point in understanding workplace behaviour as shaped more by social bonds than by official policy. Over the years, critics have questioned the scientific value of the original data. Some argue that the results were exaggerated or misinterpreted. Others say the idea that being observed boosts performance was already known. Yet the term 'Hawthorne effect' stuck. It continues to remind researchers to consider how the act of observation changes outcomes. Some explanations focus on participants trying to please the researchers. Others highlight how feedback or simply being taken seriously may improve effort. More recent studies suggest these changes are often short-lived. Still, in fields from medicine to education, knowing one is being monitored can lead to temporary gains. Despite the doubts, the Hawthorne effect serves as a warning. It reminds us that human behaviour is complex and can be shaped by subtle cues. It pushes researchers to be cautious in how they interpret results and encourages them to design studies that minimise unintended influence from observation.

2. HYPOCRISY

2.1. Why hypocrisy thrives?

(Performing virtue: The morality of appearances)

'Hypocrisy is not the antithesis of morality—it is a consequence of living in a world where morality matters'.

— Michael Ignatieff, The Needs of Strangers

'People don't just want to be good—they want to look good being good'.

— Adam Grant, Give and Take

Why hypocrisy thrives

In their study 'On why hypocrisy thrives: Reasonable doubt created by moral posturing can deter punishment[423]', Jan-Erik Lönnqvist and his colleagues explore how hypocrisy can

[423] Lönnqvist, J.-E., Rilke, R.M. and Walkowitz, G. (2015). On why hypocrisy thrives: Reasonable doubt created by moral posturing can deter punishment. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, [online] 59, pp.139–145. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.04.005.

function as a shield against punishment. The focus is not on extreme deception but on subtle strategies people use to appear fair or ethical when their actions suggest otherwise. Through a series of experiments, they demonstrate how moral posturing creates just enough doubt to protect individuals from consequences, even when their insincerity is obvious. The experiments involved bargaining scenarios where participants could make an unfair choice—such as keeping more money for themselves—while using a coin flip as a justification. In most cases, responders did not believe the coin had been used. Still, they were less inclined to punish the decision-maker if the coin was mentioned. A simple mention of a process that implied fairness softened their response. Even third-party observers, who were not involved in the transaction, showed the same reluctance. The gesture toward fairness, despite being transparently hollow, was enough to cast doubt. This finding aligns with earlier work by Batson and others, who argue that people behave morally to protect their reputation rather than from deep moral conviction. In a well-known study, participants were given a chance to assign an undesirable task to someone else but were told they could flip a coin to decide. All participants claimed to flip the coin, yet most kept the better task for themselves. The result was not fairness but the appearance of fairness—a classic case of moral hypocrisy. Lönnqvist's research adds a new layer. It shows that even when observers suspect hypocrisy, they are reluctant to punish if the transgressor has performed a symbolic act of fairness. The reluctance to punish was not explained by laziness, confusion, or sympathy. It was the doubt created by the symbolic gesture that made the difference. This suggests that moral behaviour can be strategic, not just performative. People know they are being watched and craft their actions accordingly. The implications are broad. In everyday life, gestures of fairness—whether it is citing procedure, claiming transparency, or performing small acts of contrition—can insulate individuals and institutions from criticism. The gesture does not need to be genuine. It only needs to suggest a plausible effort toward fairness. This tolerance for moral posturing helps explain why hypocrisy is so common in politics, business, and even personal relationships. It works because people, including bystanders, hesitate to punish without clear proof of wrongdoing. Moral hypocrisy, then, is not simply a personal failing. It is a social tool. When people sense that consequences hinge on public perception, they learn to act in ways that generate just enough ambiguity. The result is a culture in which symbolic gestures outweigh ethical substance, and where appearances often matter more than intentions.

Political Hypocrisy

In 'Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond[424]', David Runciman explores how hypocrisy is not merely a personal vice but a structural feature of political life. He argues that democratic societies often depend on a degree of hypocrisy—speaking ideals while acting pragmatically—to preserve stability, manage appearances, and maintain public trust, even when truth and action diverge. Hypocrisy is a word rooted in ancient Greek, where hypokrisis referred to acting on stage, feigning, or pretending. It was once a neutral term used to describe the performance of a role, especially in theater. The related word hypokritēs referred to an actor, someone who interpreted a character. But over time, this idea of assuming a false identity became linked to moral deception. By the time the term entered English around 1200, it had already taken on the meaning of pretending to be virtuous or good when one is not. Today, hypocrisy is typically understood as saying one thing and doing

[424] Runciman, D. (2008) Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond. Princeton University Press.

another. More specifically, it involves pretending to hold beliefs, values, or loyalties that a person either does not genuinely possess or fails to act on. It may also involve acting morally in public to gain praise while privately rejecting those same values. According to moral psychology, hypocrisy is not just inconsistency but a failure to live by one's own declared principles. It is the disconnect between what one says and what one does. British political thinker David Runciman describes hypocrisy as a broader pattern of false claims—about knowledge, loyalty, or even identity. These are forms of deception, and they often serve to protect social standing or gain influence. Political hypocrisy is the calculated use of a moral mask to manipulate the public for personal or political gain. It is not mere error or inconsistency, but conscious role-playing. The fascination with hypocrisy is not new. It has been a subject of reflection in folk stories, philosophy, and religion for centuries. What is new is how much attention the topic now receives from behavioural science. Since the 1980s, hypocrisy has been examined in fields such as evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and cognitive science. These disciplines seek to understand why humans are so prone to acting in contradiction to their stated beliefs, and why they often fail to notice or correct such contradictions. The original Greek roots still speak to the deeper meaning of the term. Some scholars suggest that hypokrisis might be derived from hypo- meaning 'under' and krinein, meaning 'to judge' or 'to sift'. This would imply a lack of clarity or decisiveness in one's judgment, especially about oneself. The idea is that a hypocrite is someone who cannot or will not make a clear judgment about their own values. This internal confusion or self-deception helps explain why hypocrisy persists. In ancient Athens, this theatrical association was already suspect. When the orator Demosthenes mocked his rival Aeschines for having once been an actor, it was not just to insult his past. It was to suggest that his public persona was an act, that he was not to be trusted. Later Roman culture further disdained actors as untrustworthy figures, and this sentiment helped shape the modern understanding of hypocrisy as a form of moral fraud. Hypocrisy, then, is more than a character flaw. It is a social performance, an ethical failure, and often a political strategy. In every age, people seem drawn to the appearance of virtue more than its practice—and hypocrisy is the gap between those two poles. Democracy, often celebrated as government by the people, depends on a form of 'pseudocracy'—rule by managed deception. Unlike authoritarian systems that rely on force, democracy requires consent, and that consent is maintained through the careful performance of truth, not its full disclosure. To govern effectively, leaders must tell people what they want to hear, conceal compromises, and present ideals they often cannot fulfill. In this way, democracy may demand more lying than any other system. Without illusion, promises, and strategic silence, it becomes impossible to hold power or sustain public trust.

Beyond Orwell

In today's democratic politics, hypocrisy is no longer treated as a moral failure. Politicians are not condemned for saying one thing and doing another; in fact, such contradictions are increasingly viewed as part of the normal functioning of political life. In 'Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond', David Runciman argues that this mismatch between words and actions is not only common—it may be necessary. Hypocrisy is now built into the very structure of liberal democracy, taking the form of "metahypocrisy"—conscious, conspicuous, and often openly acknowledged. Attempts to eliminate it usually reinforce it in new forms, making it less an exception than a governing habit. Some hypocrisy is mild and even useful, like the social politeness that smooths interaction. But political hypocrisy involves more serious deceptions: professing values one does not believe or making public commitments that are privately ignored. The term itself is theatrical—derived from ancient Greece, where a "hypocrite" was an actor—and it still carries the sense of performing

a moral role without sincerity. The challenge is to discern when this performance serves responsible governance and when it tips into betrayal. Liberal democracies, by nature, make promises that are almost impossible to keep. Citizens want fairness, consistency, and truth, but also flexibility, compromise, and the avoidance of cruelty. Hypocrisy arises when leaders attempt to satisfy these incompatible demands, becoming dangerous only when it conceals fundamental violations, such as endorsing torture while claiming to defend liberty. Thinkers have long recognised this tension. Hobbes saw the mask as essential for peace, while Orwell wrestled with the distance between personal integrity and political compromise—criticising others for moral evasion but acknowledging his own limits. According to Runciman, hypocrisy is neither new nor more pervasive today; what has changed is our ability to expose it. Constant media scrutiny creates an illusion of transparency but often deepens public cynicism. Even sincere politicians are accused of bad faith and attempts to avoid hypocrisy through ideological purity or technocratic neutrality tend to produce new variants. The more leaders insist they are free of hypocrisy, the more suspect they appear. When acknowledged and contained, hypocrisy may be part of the price of democratic life. But political hypocrisy has now moved beyond Orwell, becoming 'metahypocrisy'—a conspicuous hypocrisy. It is performance so embedded in governance that even after reading '1984', the same old lies still succeed, not because they deceive, but because they are expected. This is no longer a simple gap between word and deed, but a systemic mode of rule in which the performance of truth is ritualised, and its failure normalised. At this stage, democracy risks sliding into 'pseudocracy'—a system sustained not despite hypocrisy, but through it, where public life runs on scripted virtue and managed deception. Hypocrisy emerges as the governing principle of political language.

Technologies of truth

In 'Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media[425]', Toby Miller examines how visual media shape public understanding of truth, identity, and political belonging. From the Rodney King video to documentaries like 'The Times of Harvey Milk', media have not simply reflected events but actively shaped the narratives around them. They do this through framing, selection, and omission. As a result, mass media become not just tools for communication but technologies of governance. Reality, perception, and public opinion are shaped through curated images and controlled narratives. The end goal of mass media's manipulation of imagery does not merely distort truth—it redefines language. It produces a world where the real is inseparable from its representation, and where public opinion is sculpted from selective visibility. In such a world, 'pseudocracy'—rule by the performance of truth—thrives, sustained by a visual field that commands belief while concealing its own construction. In democratic societies, where consent must be maintained rather than enforced, visual media function as instruments of persuasion, embedding ideology in the very fabric of public memory. The Rodney King video, often cited as undeniable evidence of police brutality, became a case study in how visual truth is manipulated. Slow motion, selective framing, and rhetorical interpretation by the defence team transformed King's suffering into a performance of threat, persuading a jury to accept visible violence as lawful restraint. The footage did not speak on its own; it had to be taught to say what power needed it to say. This transformation of raw image into ideological message is not limited to courtroom strategies. Documentaries like 'The Times of Harvey Milk' construct emotional, polished portrayals that mobilise public sympathy while omitting inconvenient details—sanitising history in service of moral clarity. Even allegedly educational content, such as the PBS series 'The Americas', reveals how political pressure distorts meaning. The original

[425] Miller, T. (2007) Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media. Temple University Press.

British version portrayed Latin American revolutionaries as complex actors in their historical context. The American edit, shaped by Cold War ideology, repackaged those same movements as mere threats to Western order. The shift in narrative did not just alter the facts—it reshaped public language, recoding rebellion as terrorism and solidarity as danger. Through such techniques, mass media produce what might be called 'synthetic citizenship'—a sense of identity and belonging built on symbolic participation rather than informed engagement. Visual media train viewers not only in what to believe but how to speak, what to remember, and what to forget. They supply the imagery through which people interpret social life, offering prepackaged moral scripts in place of critical reflection. As Edward Markey warned, this creates an 'informational apartheid', where digital access and media literacy determine who gets to participate in the public sphere and who remains voiceless. In this environment, lies do not need to appear as lies. They arrive embedded in images, tone, pacing, and omission. They operate not by outright contradiction but by framing: showing part of the truth in a way that distorts the whole. As entertainment, news, and ideology blur into one visual stream, language becomes saturated with borrowed phrases, manipulated sympathies, and rehearsed outrage. The public learns to feel before it thinks, to react before it understands. Media become not just technologies of communication, but mechanisms of control—shaping what is seen, what can be said, and what can be imagined. In today's media-saturated world, a fake image can become accepted truth simply because millions have seen it—on television, in cinemas, or on their phones. Repetition across platforms lends the image credibility, not because of its accuracy, but because of its visibility. Once internalised by large audiences, these images produce strong and stable opinions that people not only believe but feel compelled to share across social networks. This is the true power of what might be called 'technologies of truth': not to inform, but to implant. The final goal is not the image itself, but its echo—how it rewires inner speech, shapes moral instincts, and generates reflexive slogans that activate automatically whenever a certain face, name, or scene appears. Names like Rodney King, George Floyd, or Greta Thunberg no longer refer simply to people—they trigger emotional and ideological scripts. Just as Pavlov's dog salivated at the bell, people now respond to images with conditioned phrases, ready-made opinions, and a sense of certainty that feels like knowledge but was carefully manufactured through language. Truth repeated by millions becomes a parrot's song—loud, hollow, and believed because it never stops.

Organisational hypocrisy

In his 2006 article 'Organisational Hypocrisy [426]', Robert Charette explores how institutions often present one face to the public while operating quite differently behind the scenes. Drawing on the work of Swedish economist Nils Brunsson, Charette describes this disconnect as 'organisational hypocrisy'. It occurs when what organisations say, what they decide, and what they do are not aligned. While this may sound like deceit, Charette suggests it can be a survival mechanism, especially when an institution faces conflicting pressures. Many public agencies are caught in contradictions they cannot easily escape. Take the Federal Aviation Administration. It is responsible for promoting air travel while also safeguarding passenger safety. These goals often clash. As a result, the agency sometimes only acts decisively after a major accident, which damages its credibility. But this delay is not always due to negligence. It reflects the reality of balancing commercial, political, and safety concerns in an environment full of competing demands. Organisational hypocrisy plays out both in public view

[426] Charette, R. (2006) Organizational Hypocrisy. Government Executive; Washington Vol. 38, Iss. 7, (May 1, 2006): 68,70.

and behind closed doors. Externally, it affects how trustworthy an institution appears. Internally, it affects how employees feel about their work. Workers often notice when management makes lofty promises but cuts corners in practice. Job ads describe inspiring roles, while day-to-day tasks are often mundane or poorly supported. Speeches about innovation ring hollow when budgets are slashed and resources disappear. NASA's recent handling of budget cuts offers a clear example. The agency's leadership described the reductions in space science and astrobiology as 'temporary speed bumps'. But many scientists and engineers saw them as long-term threats to meaningful research. This kind of minimisation undermines trust. It makes workers feel dismissed. When reality no longer matches the story told from the top, morale breaks down. People begin to tune out, or worse, leave. If the gap between words and actions grows too wide, the result is systemic dysfunction. Leaders begin to inhabit a different reality than their workforce. Employees no longer believe what they are told. Cynicism spreads. The organisation becomes incapable of reform from within. This kind of breakdown is not always visible until a crisis occurs. In ordinary times, the system may 'muddle through'. But when pressure mounts, the cracks widen fast. The response to Hurricane Katrina revealed how deep the dysfunction could go. FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security failed to coordinate a timely response. Yet President Bush publicly praised FEMA's performance. The contradiction was so stark that it shattered any remaining public trust. Once exposed, organisational hypocrisy is hard to repair. Even genuine reform efforts face suspicion. The damage is not just to reputation but to the internal coherence of the agency. Charette argues that some degree of hypocrisy is unavoidable. But when it grows unchecked, it threatens the very stability of the institution. Organisations that survive long term should be those that strive to keep rhetoric and reality as close as possible. That means acknowledging limits, making difficult choices openly, and speaking plainly—even when the truth is uncomfortable. But is it more important for an organisation to endure, or for its ruling elite to exploit hypocrisy for profit and success? If there are no consequences for lying, they can abandon the organisation entirely and start a new one whenever it suits them. In the end, it is merely a matter of changing the names on the office door.

Truth as a pretence

In his essay 'Truth as a Pretence[427]', James A. Woodbridge presents a striking idea: the concept of truth, as commonly used in language, works more like a pretence than a description of some real property. He does not argue that pretending something is truly makes it so. Rather, he suggests that truth-talk functions within a framework of make-believe, much like fictional storytelling. This approach, a form of fictionalism, allows language to express ideas more flexibly without committing to truth as a metaphysical property. The core of Woodbridge's argument is that when people say things like 'What Bob said is true', they are not pointing to a real property called truth. Instead, they are using a kind of linguistic shortcut. This pretence enables useful generalisations that would otherwise be awkward or impossible to express. For example, rather than repeating each individual statement Bob made, one can simply say, 'Everything Bob says is true'. That form of speech relies on a background fiction—that 'truth' is a real quality that statements can have. To make this clearer, Woodbridge draws on Kendall Walton's theory of make-believe. Walton's idea explains how children's games work through agreed-upon pretences. In a game, a patch of mud can be a 'pie', and placing it in a hollow stump can count as 'baking'. These rules are not real but accepted within the fiction. Similarly, in

[427] Woodbridge, J.A. (2021). Truth as a Pretense. [online] Philpapers.org. Available at: https://philpapers.org/rec/WOOTAA-3 [Accessed 23 Jul. 2025].

everyday discourse, phrases like 'is true' behave as if they describe something real, even though no such property exists. According to Woodbridge, this use of pretence explains how language can generalise and organise information efficiently. It also helps resolve philosophical problems, like the Liar Paradox. In that case, the statement 'This sentence is not true' leads to a contradiction if taken seriously. But if truth is a pretence, then the sentence is part of a fictional structure and does not refer to anything real. As a result, it does not generate a logical problem, because it is not actually claiming anything about the world. Woodbridge also addresses a criticism: that pretence might still depend on some understanding of truth. For example, someone might argue that to pretend something is the case, one must already know what it means for something to be true. He answers this by redefining pretence without using the idea of truth. To pretend that X has a feature F is simply to act as if it does, regardless of whether it really does or not. In this way, pretence can operate independently of any assumed concept of truth. Woodbridge's approach offers a new path through old philosophical debates. Instead of treating truth as a mysterious or elusive property, his theory sees it as a practical device embedded in how people talk. This device helps organise knowledge, smooth communication, and avoid unnecessary complexity. Truth, then, is less an objective feature of statements than a way of speaking—a useful fiction that keeps language running.

'Not In My Name'

In 'A Compendium of Modern Hypocrisy[428]', Julie Burchill and Chas Newkey-Burden dissect the contradictions of contemporary moral posturing. Today's hypocrisy is not limited to conservative figures caught betraying their public values. It now flourishes among those who present themselves as progressive, liberal, and ethically enlightened. These individuals often express solidarity with causes that, on closer inspection, conflict with their own stated principles. The phrase 'Not In My Name', chanted during the Iraq War protests, became a slogan for self-identification rather than solidarity. Protesters, enjoying the freedoms of liberal democracies, stood against efforts to extend those freedoms elsewhere. They decried surveillance in their own countries while ignoring the brutality of regimes where dissent results in imprisonment or execution. Some later even aligned themselves with Hezbollah, a group whose ideology clashes with the very values these activists claimed to uphold—gender equality, free speech, and LGBTQ+ rights. Burchill and Newkey-Burden note that this is not merely inconsistent—it is a fundamental betrayal of moral clarity. The irony is sharp: groups like Hezbollah are not hypocrites. Their actions, however objectionable, are consistent with their beliefs. The double standard lies with those who condemn Western liberal democracies while excusing or romanticising the violence and repression of authoritarian movements. This hypocrisy also extends into personal behaviour. Critics of consumer culture indulge in luxury; those who denounce classism sneer at the working class; environmental activists travel the world by plane while lecturing others about carbon footprints. Moral signalling often becomes a way of feeling righteous without confronting personal contradiction. Nowhere is this more evident than in attitudes toward Israel and the Middle East. Israel, a democracy with protections for minorities and progressive social policies, is relentlessly condemned. Meanwhile, regimes with deeply misogynistic and homophobic laws are treated with cautious respect or ignored entirely. Palestinian suffering is highlighted only when Israel is involved, while atrocities committed by Arab governments are met with silence. The same selective outrage applies to Cuba. Guantanamo Bay attracts widespread criticism, yet the decades-long oppression of dissidents and minorities under Castro receives little attention. Che Guevara is still lionised in

[428] Burchill, J. and Newkey-Burden, C. (2006) A Compendium of Modern Hypocrisy. Harper Perennial.

popular culture despite his record of violence and repression. Political heroes are chosen not for their deeds but for their symbolic value to a particular ideology. Even American presidents are judged with partisan inconsistency. George W. Bush's efforts in Africa are overlooked, while his verbal blunders are endlessly mocked. Bill Clinton, who did less for African aid, is praised as the more enlightened leader. Anti-American sentiment often coexists with a deep fascination for American culture, media, and politics. Critics who condemn U.S. foreign policy obsess over American elections while ignoring oppressive regimes closer to home. What emerges from Burchill and Newkey-Burden's account is a troubling picture: modern hypocrisy thrives on selective outrage and performative virtue. Activism becomes less about principles and more about identity, signalling membership in a moral tribe. In this environment, truth becomes secondary to narrative, and contradiction is no longer a flaw but a feature.

Hypocrisy and the philosophical intentions

Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of philosophy. He spoke passionately of civic virtue, natural goodness, and the moral life, yet his personal choices often contradicted these ideals. The most infamous example is his decision to abandon his children to an orphanage, even while writing about the sanctity of family. Rousseau also promoted public engagement but frequently withdrew from society, feuded with friends, and became increasingly paranoid and isolated. These contradictions have shaped what scholars call the 'Jean-Jacques problem'—the tension between the man and his message. In 'The Jean-Jacques Problem[429]' Matthew D. Mendham revisits this issue by questioning whether Rousseau's personal failings undermine his philosophical contributions. The divide between thought and action in Rousseau's life has sparked three main responses. One insists that his ideas must be judged apart from his personal conduct. Another suggests that his hypocrisy discredits his philosophy entirely. A third, more nuanced view proposes that Rousseau himself was aware of his inconsistencies and wrestled with them, making his work a record of both aspiration and failure. During the height of his intellectual productivity in the 1750s and early 1760s, Rousseau tried to live according to his principles. He rejected material wealth, gave to the poor, and defended the republican spirit of Geneva. He believed moral reformers should practice what they preached, openly criticising writers who failed to do so. But his exile from France, the exposure of his personal secrets, and his bitter stay in England with David Hume marked a turning point. Instead of continuing to strive for coherence, Rousseau began defending his personal flaws by invoking the idea of natural innocence. His confessional writings no longer modelled virtue but offered excuses. Figures like Edmund Burke viewed Rousseau as emblematic of a new kind of moral danger—someone who preached civic virtue while feeding a cult of self. Burke considered Rousseau a source of the radicalism that would erupt in the French Revolution. His autobiography, intended as a moral defence, only confirmed the image of a man who admired virtue in theory but fell short in practice. This raises a philosophical dilemma: Can someone who fails to live by their principles still offer moral guidance? For Seneca, the answer was yes—moral growth was an ongoing process, and imperfections did not cancel aspiration. Socrates, by contrast, believed philosophy had to be lived. Rousseau seems to have held the Socratic view in his early years, insisting on the alignment of belief and behaviour. Yet later, he drifted into rationalisation. Rousseau's legacy, then, lies not in his moral perfection but in the drama of his contradictions. His struggle between conviction and conduct is neither a disproof of his thought nor a mere personal weakness. Instead, it reflects a deeper truth about human nature and the burden of consistency. Jean-Jacques Rousseau began his

[429] Mendham, M. D. (2011) The Jean-Jacques Problem. American Journal of Political Science, 55(3).

philosophical life with a strong desire to live by the ideals he promoted. He wrote of virtue, civic responsibility, and moral rigor, believing that a good society could only be built on the foundation of upright individuals. In his early writings, he encouraged self-discipline, duty to the republic, and personal sacrifice for the greater good. For a time, he tried to live this way. He rejected material comfort, supported Geneva's republican ideals, and criticised those who preached virtue but lived selfishly. But Rousseau's life took a turn. Exiled from France, shamed for abandoning his children, and increasingly isolated, he changed. His later works no longer urged others toward strict moral standards. Instead, they focused on defending himself. He framed his solitude not as a failing but as a necessity, a response to a corrupt and hostile world. The man who once praised public duty began to turn inward, finding virtue in natural goodness and withdrawing from the demands of society. Rousseau's philosophy became less about prescribing virtue and more about recognising the difficulty of achieving it. His life and writings reflect an ongoing tension between what he believed and what he could live.

The problem of inauthenticity

In his study of identity and social behaviour 'Status and Identity: The Problem of Inauthenticity[430]', Melvin Seeman examines how inauthenticity arises when individuals struggle to reconcile personal identity with the roles society assigns them. Drawing on existentialist thought, especially Jean-Paul Sartre's reflections in 'Anti-Semite and Jew', Seeman explores how the pressure to escape an imposed identity leads to self-distortion. Sartre described how some Jews, in response to anti-Semitism, tried either to disavow their identity or embody it in exaggerated ways. Seeman expands this idea to a wider range of social contexts, focusing on how status can distort self-understanding. He presents several cases that reflect this problem. A Black man might adjust his speech or demeanour to avoid confirming racial stereotypes. Another might emphasise those same traits in a performative way. A school administrator may project confidence in public while privately doubting his ability. A university professor may minimise his intellectual identity in social settings to avoid being labelled arrogant or disconnected. Each of these examples shows how individuals, in navigating their social environment, often hide or reshape aspects of themselves, resulting in internal conflict. Seeman outlines three patterns through which inauthenticity appears. First is the acceptance of negative stereotypes, often unconsciously. For example, Black children might associate light skin with higher status or positive traits, internalising a harmful social narrative. Second is defensive overcompensation. Here, individuals try to distance themselves from a stereotype by behaving in the opposite direction, which may create a distorted version of the self. Third is self-deception, when people internalise an idealised image of their role or status and suppress any feelings that contradict it. This is common in institutional roles, where expectations are clear but inner experiences are more complex. What makes authenticity difficult, Seeman argues, is that identity is not formed in isolation. Social roles, expectations, and feedback constantly shape how individuals see themselves. Sartre's model, which defines inauthenticity as fleeing from one's imposed identity, risks turning identity into a fixed object—something you must either accept or reject. Anatole Broyard offered a different view, focusing on remaining true to a supposed 'essential self', but this too overlooks the social construction of identity. Seeman proposes a more balanced position. Authenticity requires self-awareness—recognising how society influences self-perception, without becoming a mere reflection of those influences. It involves resisting imposed definitions while acknowledging that identity is partly relational. To be authentic is not to isolate oneself from others, but to maintain integrity

[430] Seeman, M. (1966) Status and Identity: The Problem of Inauthenticity. Sociometry, 29(1).

in the face of external pressures. In the end, Seeman sees inauthenticity as a common outcome of navigating a complex society. The pressure to conform or resist often leads to distortion, misunderstanding, and self-alienation. His analysis offers a way to understand how individuals lose touch with themselves in the effort to meet or escape the expectations tied to their social status.

2.2. Organised hypocrisy

(The systemic logic of hypocrisy: Institutions and the performance of integrity)

'Organisations often talk like idealists, decide like pragmatists, and act like opportunists'.

— Martha Finnemore, Rules for the World

'Hypocrisy in institutions is not a bug—it is often a functional adaptation to contradictory pressures'.

— David Mathews, The Ecology of Democracy

Organisational deception

In their study 'Organisational Contexts, Social Relations and Types of Lying[431]', Sarah Jenkins and Rick Delbridge examine how lying functions within organisational life. While lying is often seen as a personal failure or a moral issue, their research shows that it is also a structured, social behaviour shaped by workplace demands. People lie not only for themselves but also for the sake of their roles, colleagues, or employers. Understanding organisational deception requires looking beyond individual motives and into the systems that make lying seem necessary or even acceptable. The paper defines lying as a deliberate attempt to mislead. But it does not treat all lies the same. Lies differ depending on their purpose and the environment in which they are told. They organise lies into four types: principled, defensive, material, and malicious. Each reflects a different set of motives and consequences. Principled lies are told to protect others or uphold certain values. Defensive lies are used to survive in a workplace where expectations clash with reality. Material lies aim to gain something concrete, like money. Malicious lies are told to harm others or gain power. These lies do not arise randomly. They emerge from specific organisational contexts. Some workplaces reward deception; others simply tolerate it. In some cases, employees are pressured to lie as part of their job. In call centres, for example, workers might be told to hide their real location or pretend to be someone they are not. In sales environments, misleading customers may be encouraged to meet targets. In other settings, lying can become a kind of skill, used to present a polished image or manage difficult interactions. Social relationships—whether marked by cooperation, competition, or distrust—also affect how lies are used and justified. The study also includes detailed case studies. In one, call centre employees were pushed to lie to customers to meet strict performance goals, creating tension and dissatisfaction. In another, workers in Indian call centres were forced to hide their identities to cater to Western clients, resulting in emotional strain. Sales workers in a retail environment exaggerated claims to close deals, believing this behaviour was expected. In contrast, workers at a virtual receptionist service found meaning in small lies that helped them deliver a seamless experience. These examples show that deception

[431] Jenkins, S. and Delbridge, R. (2017) Organizational Contexts, Social Relations and Types of Lying. Journal of Organizational Ethnography, 6(3).

in the workplace is not just about ethics; it is also about survival, performance, and professionalism. Lying in organisations should be seen as a complex and often rational response to workplace conditions. People do not simply choose to lie—they respond to pressures, incentives, and social expectations. Lying becomes part of the job, part of the culture, and sometimes even part of one's identity as a worker.

The logic of noble lies

In 'Picking Sides in the War on Virtue[432]', Jeremy Lott offers a defence of hypocrisy, arguing that it is often misunderstood and too easily condemned. While many view hypocrisy as a clear moral failing, Lott suggests that it can sometimes play a productive role in society. He draws on the ideas of ethicist Max Scheler, who believed that even when people fail to live up to their ideals, their public commitment to those ideals still holds value. A society where people pretend to be good is preferable to one where people reject goodness altogether. Lott challenges the idea that only the morally perfect have the right to speak about virtue. This 'saint or shut up' attitude, he argues, discourages moral growth. Instead, he sees hypocrisy as a sign that people still recognise the importance of moral standards, even when they fall short. For instance, the Founding Fathers owned slaves, but their declaration that all men are created equal laid the foundation for the eventual abolition of slavery. Their failure to live up to their ideals did not invalidate the ideals themselves. Historical examples like St. Paul show how moral contradictions can still lead to progress. Paul supported Roman authority yet preached spiritual equality. These mixed messages helped lay the groundwork for the future dismantling of slavery in Europe. In modern times, when a politician protects his child from drug charges despite having supported strict laws, it may seem hypocritical—but Lott sees it as a reflection of human loyalty, not simple moral failure. Hypocrisy, Lott argues, should not always be condemned. It often reflects an aspiration to do better, even when people fall short. In this sense, hypocrisy may be less a vice than a flawed but useful path toward moral progress. Organised hypocrisy thrives because people are remarkably skilled at rationalising deception when it serves a cause they believe is just. Rather than confronting contradictions, individuals and institutions often structure them into daily operations, convincing themselves that lies, double standards, and selective virtue are necessary trade-offs for achieving a greater good. Jonathan Rauch expands this view in his discussion of 'Hidden Law'—the unwritten norms that govern society beneath formal rules. He contrasts this with 'Bureaucratic Legalism', a rigid system that insists on full transparency and consistency. Hidden Law allows for discretion. It recognises that strict adherence to formal rules can be destructive, especially when it comes to human behaviour. In matters like school discipline, speech regulation, or even end-of-life care, hypocrisy once allowed for flexibility. Attempts to codify every moral rule have often produced harsher, less humane results. Rauch points to events like the Clinton impeachment to show how rigid moral enforcement can backfire. Despite Clinton's personal failings, the public preferred to tolerate the hypocrisy rather than remove a president over a private matter. In the case of assisted suicide, what was once handled discreetly through informal compassion became legally inaccessible under regulation. In this context, hypocrisy is not merely tolerated but institutionalised—embedded in the rituals of politics, morality, and social discourse—where saying the right thing matters more than doing it and believing in a cause justifies any contradiction required to defend it. Organised hypocrisy becomes a virtue when public loyalty

[432] Lott, J. (2006) Picking Sides in the War on Virtue. Thomas Nelson.

to ideals is valued more than private consistency, allowing contradictions to be framed as moral commitment rather than failure.

Hypocrisy and moral ambiguity

In 'Dissociation, Shame, and the Ethics of Inauthenticity[433]', Ronald C. Naso explores the psychological roots of hypocrisy and self-deception. Far from being a rare or purely pathological condition, dissociation—an experience often linked to hypocrisy—appears in everyday life. Forgetting whether one has shampooed their hair or arriving at a destination without recalling the drive are examples of common dissociative episodes. These moments, though mundane, reveal how easily the mind can split awareness and action. Dissociation exists on a spectrum. At one end are harmless lapses in memory or attention. At the other are serious disorders involving identity disruption or emotional numbing. Researchers like Cardeña and Wiener describe two main types of dissociation: compartmentalisation, where mental processes that should be integrated remain separate, and detachment, where individuals feel cut off from their emotions or surroundings. These are not always signs of illness. They can be normal responses to fatigue or stress. But when persistent or extreme, they suggest deeper conflict. This splitting of awareness is closely tied to hypocrisy. Hypocrisy often arises from the need to avoid shame and protect the self from painful truths. Rather than lying outright, the hypocrite may unconsciously separate their public behaviour from private motives. They may believe in what they say while doing the opposite, not out of manipulation but because they cannot fully face the contradiction. The mind maintains a sense of coherence by keeping conflicting truths apart. Self-deception allows people to both know and not know uncomfortable facts at the same time. This creates moral ambiguity, as individuals avoid responsibility while clinging to a virtuous image. Dissociation, in this light, becomes a tool for managing ethical discomfort. Psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg takes this further, suggesting that we all inhabit multiple 'self-states'. These selves are shaped by different experiences and can coexist without full awareness of each other. When one self takes over, others recede. This helps explain how people can behave in contradictory ways and still feel consistent. The hypocrite is not always acting; they are often caught between incompatible versions of themselves. In this view, hypocrisy is not simple deceit but a form of adaptation. It reflects an effort to maintain stability in the face of inner conflict and external demands. The mask the hypocrite wears protects them from shame and the fear of rejection. It offers social approval while shielding the fragile self behind it. Naso uses the metaphor of masks to describe how hypocrisy operates. Masks can allow for transformation, adaptation, and social ease. But they can also conceal harmful motives and prevent self-reflection. Wearing a mask too long can lead to confusion between appearance and reality. The danger lies not in the mask itself, but in forgetting it is there. Hypocrisy often shields individuals from shame. Those who fear being exposed as inadequate or unworthy may perform moral virtue to maintain social approval. Over time, this performance becomes habitual. The hypocrite convinces others—and often themselves—that they are the person they appear to be. This dissociation, where conflicting realities are kept apart, allows them to function without confronting the ethical dissonance beneath the surface. Hypocrisy is not always harmful. In politics and public life, it can serve as a social lubricant. A public official might conceal controversial views to build consensus or secure funding for a greater good. In such cases, hypocrisy can enable cooperation or prevent greater harm. Hypocrisy often arises not from malice but from the difficult task of reconciling competing truths. It is a way of coping with moral expectations that feel impossible to meet. Understanding hypocrisy as a psychological

[433] Naso, R. C. (2010) Dissociation, Shame, and the Ethics of Inauthenticity. Routledge.

defence, rather than a moral collapse, helps explain why it is so persistent and difficult to confront. It reveals a complex effort to preserve self-image, navigate social pressures, and avoid painful truths.

The politics of politeness

In 'Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen[434]', Jenny Davidson explores how hypocrisy was not always seen as a moral failure but sometimes as a necessary feature of polite society. In the eighteenth century, hypocrisy and politeness were linked. Social life depended on manners that often masked true feelings. These polite performances, while insincere, were essential for maintaining peace and order. Without them, families, institutions, and governments risked collapse. Hypocrisy, then, was not always condemned; it was, in some circles, quietly respected. Eighteenth-century writers such as Swift, Hume, and Burke defended civility, even when it required dissembling. They saw politeness as a stabilising force in society. Critics accused them of justifying falsehood, but their defence was pragmatic: better a society held together by polite hypocrisy than one torn apart by blunt honesty. Davidson shows how these thinkers believed that imitating virtue, even if insincere, could lead to the real thing. Habit, they argued, has the power to shape character. Samuel Johnson and later thinkers like William James extended this idea, suggesting that repeated performance of virtue could become second nature. This culture of politeness had clear exclusions. Politeness was not available to everyone in the same way. It depended on class and gender. For women, politeness was not just encouraged; it was required. Female behaviour was shaped by expectations of modesty, self-restraint, and silence. In novels like Austen's 'Mansfield Park', women's hypocrisy—expressed through tact and reserve—was not merely tolerated but sometimes portrayed as a necessary form of survival. Women were judged more harshly for impoliteness than for insincerity. Davidson also discusses the political uses of hypocrisy. During the revolution debates of the 1790s, Burke defended chivalry and politeness, while Wollstonecraft called for a new kind of female sincerity. Yet even she, Davidson argues, remained committed to a broader ethic of decency. The tension between public civility and private conviction was not easily resolved. The servant question further complicates the story. Jonathan Swift, in 'A Project for the Advancement of Religion', defended hypocrisy as a kind of social armour for the elite but condemned it in servants. The metaphor 'the livery of religion' suggested virtue when worn by gentlemen and deceit when worn by the lower classes. This double standard reveals the class dimension of hypocrisy. What was considered a graceful disguise for one class became suspicious behaviour in another. Davidson's analysis shows how politeness operated as both a moral and political language. It helped individuals navigate power structures while also enforcing social hierarchies. Politeness offered a script for belonging but came at a cost, especially for those without social privilege. Hypocrisy, viewed through this lens, becomes less a personal flaw and more a tool for negotiating impossible demands.

Organised hypocrisy of foreign policy

In their article 'The Organised Hypocrisy of Ethical Foreign Policy[435]', Richard Perkins and Eric Neumayer explore how Western states routinely promote human rights and democracy while continuing to sell arms to authoritarian regimes. They define this institutionalised contradiction as 'organised hypocrisy', where moral ideals are publicly affirmed but privately

[434] Davidson, J. (2004) Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen. Oxford University Press.
[435] Perkins, R. and Neumayer, E. (2010). The organized hypocrisy of ethical foreign policy: Human rights, democracy and Western arms sales. Geoforum, 41(2), pp.247–256.

undermined to serve strategic and economic interests. In recent years, Western governments have increasingly spoken of foreign policy in ethical terms. Promoting democracy and human rights abroad is presented as a guiding principle. Yet, when it comes to the arms trade, this moral stance collapses under scrutiny. States like the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States continue to export weapons to regimes with questionable human rights records. These actions suggest that ethical concerns are often subordinated to economic and strategic interests. The term 'ethical foreign policy' gained traction in the 1990s, signalling a shift away from Cold War-era realpolitik. Leaders began using the language of morality to frame their international decisions. However, the continuation of arms deals with authoritarian or repressive regimes undermines the sincerity of such commitments. Weapons are regularly supplied to governments that stifle dissent, suppress civil liberties, or engage in internal conflict. These sales are justified with vague references to regional stability or counterterrorism, masking the deeper motivations of profit and influence. The concept 'organised hypocrisy' describes a situation in which states maintain a formal commitment to certain norms while simultaneously violating them in practice. In the context of arms sales, ethical language becomes a diplomatic tool rather than a genuine standard. States appear committed to moral ideals, but only when doing so aligns with their interests. When it does not, ethics are sidelined, and deals proceed as usual. This pattern reveals a structural issue in international politics. Arms exports are deeply embedded in national economies and defence industries. Thousands of jobs depend on continued production and trade, and governments are often reluctant to sacrifice this economic benefit. Additionally, arms sales serve geopolitical objectives—securing alliances, countering rivals, or gaining leverage. These strategic motivations frequently outweigh the moral costs of empowering regimes that violate the very values the West claims to champion. Often the application of ethical standards is selective. Countries critical of human rights abuses in one context may ignore or even support them elsewhere. This inconsistency further damages the credibility of ethical foreign policy. Rather than being a universal framework, it functions more as a rhetorical shield—useful when confronting adversaries, but dispensable when dealing with allies or trading partners. In conclusion, the notion of an ethical foreign policy often fails to withstand real-world pressures. The ongoing arms trade with authoritarian states illustrates the gap between proclaimed values and actual behaviour. While Western leaders continue to speak of democracy and human rights, their actions reveal a different priority: the pursuit of economic gain and strategic power. This gap is not accidental but organised—a systematic form of hypocrisy that shapes international relations today.

Organised hypocrisy and international organisations

In 'The Organisation of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organisations[436]' (1989), Nils Brunsson explores how modern organisations maintain legitimacy by decoupling what they say, decide, and do—engaging in systematic hypocrisy as a functional response to conflicting external demands. Rather than viewing this as dysfunction, Brunsson argues that such inconsistency is often necessary for organisations to survive in complex institutional environments. International organisations have long been subject to criticism for failing to live up to their stated ideals. On one side, they are praised as mechanisms of global cooperation. On the other, they are accused of contradiction and duplicity. In their article, researchers explore the idea that this inconsistency is not simply a failure of will or principle. Instead, it is a structural feature of how these organisations operate within a fragmented world of conflicting

[436] Brunsson, N. (1989) The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organizations, Wiley.

expectations. From the League of Nations to the modern United Nations, international organisations have promised peace, stability, and shared governance. Yet their actions often fall short. The UN may declare a commitment to human rights, while remaining silent during acts of genocide. The World Bank may promote economic justice while enforcing austerity policies that hurt the most vulnerable. These discrepancies are often labelled as hypocrisy. But the concept of 'organised hypocrisy' provides a deeper explanation. Rather than assuming bad faith, it suggests that such contradictions result from the impossible demands placed on institutions trying to satisfy multiple stakeholders at once. The theory comes from Nils Brunsson's work on organisations that must operate in environments full of conflicting pressures. He argues that talk, decision, and action are often decoupled—not because of deception, but as a survival mechanism. For example, an organisation may issue strong statements about peace while authorising aggressive interventions. These contradictions are not accidental. They allow the institution to speak to different audiences—governments, NGOs, the public—without collapsing under the weight of conflicting demands. Stephen Krasner's version of the theory adds a political dimension. He focuses on how states behave under pressure from international norms, especially regarding sovereignty. Leaders often uphold these norms in speeches while ignoring them in practice. This too is a kind of organised hypocrisy—not a lie, but a way of managing the tension between ideology and realpolitik. These insights are particularly visible in peacekeeping missions. The UN talks of neutrality, consent, and limited force. Yet recent operations—whether in Congo, Haiti, or Mali—have involved actions that break from these principles. The gap between stated norms and actual conduct becomes a space where necessary but controversial actions can occur. While this flexibility may allow the UN to respond more effectively, it also damages its legitimacy. The organisation's credibility suffers when words no longer match reality. Organised hypocrisy, then, is not just a flaw. It can be a function—enabling global institutions to move forward in a fractured world. However, this same mechanism can lead to stagnation, distrust, and eventual ineffectiveness. The challenge is to recognise when this kind of strategic inconsistency is useful, and when it becomes corrosive. In the end, the dilemmas of global governance cannot be resolved by purifying rhetoric or enforcing rigid consistency. Instead, they demand a more honest engagement with the complexities of international politics and a careful balance between principle and pragmatism.

Organisational hypocrisy in business schools

Many business schools today proudly claim to prepare students for a sustainable future. They sign global declarations like the UN's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), and they speak of aligning economic success with environmental and social responsibility. Yet these promises often to remain disconnected from the actual structure and content of their educational programs. In 'Organisational Hypocrisy in Business Schools with Sustainability Commitments[437]', Annie C. Snelson-Powell, along with Johanne Grosvold and Andrew Millington, explores this gap between public commitment and institutional action, drawing on interviews with MBA directors across UK schools to understand the forces driving this inconsistency. This gap—what scholars call organisational hypocrisy—is not always rooted in deliberate deception. Often, it reflects internal challenges. For example, limited resources, lack of expertise in sustainability, or deeply embedded institutional traditions can prevent meaningful change. Some schools express a genuine interest in sustainable management but lack the capacity or flexibility to alter established curricula. Others might feel constrained by

[437] Snelson-Powell, A. et al. (2020) 'Organizational Hypocrisy in Business Schools with Sustainability Commitments', Journal of Business Ethics, 162(4), pp. 825–842.

external accreditation systems or rankings that prioritise financial performance and prestige over social responsibility. Snelson-Powell's study shows that talk-action inconsistency is frequently unintentional. Still, its effects are real. When schools publicise sustainability values but fail to deliver, they risk undermining their credibility. Students may leave with a superficial understanding of sustainability, and employers may question the relevance of sustainability training. In these ways, organisational hypocrisy—even when unintended—can have long-term consequences. Interestingly, larger, and more prestigious schools appear more vulnerable to this problem. Their reputations depend heavily on public image, and so they may feel pressure to adopt popular sustainability language while keeping internal change to a minimum. This creates a performance dynamic where sustainability becomes more of a public relations tool than an educational priority. The concept of organised hypocrisy, first developed by Nils Brunsson, helps explain this behaviour. It describes how organisations separate what they say, what they decide, and what they do to manage conflicting expectations. For business schools, this means expressing commitment to sustainability to satisfy students, partners, and accreditation bodies—while continuing to teach and structure programs around more traditional business goals. The study also connects to broader work on sustainability reporting in corporations, such as Charles H. Cho's analysis of organisational façades. These façades—rational, progressive, and reputation-based—allow companies to appeal to different audiences without making major changes. The same logic applies to business schools. They use progressive language, promote innovation, and project responsibility without embedding these values in their core practices. Despite good intentions business schools often fall into patterns of intentional hypocrisy. Talk alone is not enough.

Organisational facades

Corporate sustainability has become a key theme in recent decades, but the distance between what companies say and what they do remains wide. Despite growing pressure from the public and regulators, many firms continue to issue sustainability reports that offer little more than polished language and good intentions. In 'Organised hypocrisy, organisational facades, and sustainability reporting[438]' Charles H. Cho addresses this gap by examining how companies manage the tension between conflicting demands through what is known as 'organised hypocrisy' and the creation of 'organisational façades'. Instead of viewing sustainability reporting simply as a matter of honest or dishonest communication, Cho argues that companies are responding to deeply rooted institutional pressures. On one side, stakeholders demand transparency and environmental action. On the other, business realities often require firms to prioritise profit and competitiveness. This contradiction forces companies into a kind of performance. They talk about sustainability, set targets, and publish glossy reports. But behind the scenes, little changes. These performances are façades that allow them to appear responsible while continuing with business as usual. Cho draws on the work of Nils Brunsson, who developed the concept of organised hypocrisy to describe how organisations deal with incompatible pressures. They say one thing, decide another, and do something else entirely. The point is not to deceive in a simple sense but to survive in a complex and often contradictory environment. These hypocrisies are not mistakes. They are strategies. Similarly, the idea of organisational façades describes how companies build visible structures—like codes of ethics or sustainability offices—not to transform their behaviour, but to manage how others perceive them. To ground these ideas, Cho examines two large U.S. oil companies during a

[438] Cho, C.H. (2021) 'Organized hypocrisy, organizational façades and sustainability reporting', Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal, 34(7), pp. 1574–1597.

period of public debate over drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge. These firms released sustainability reports filled with claims about environmental stewardship yet continued to pursue extractive policies. The façade was maintained through language, branding, and selective disclosures. The reports served not as tools of transformation but as shields, allowing the companies to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the public while continuing to operate in environmentally harmful ways. This analysis raises serious questions about the usefulness of sustainability reporting. If such reports are shaped more by the need to manage appearances than by the desire to foster real change, then they risk becoming part of the problem. They may lull the public into a false sense of security or allow corporations to delay meaningful reform. The conclusion is not that all sustainability reporting is useless. Rather, Cho calls for a more critical understanding of what these reports do. By recognising the pressures that drive organised hypocrisy and facades, one can better assess when sustainability claims reflect real action and when they serve to mask business-as-usual practices.

The necessity of pretence

In 'Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics[439]' (1997), Ruth Grant examines how both thinkers grapple with the moral contradictions of political life, revealing the tension between ethical ideals and the pragmatic demands of power. In liberal political systems, decisions are supposed to be made through reasoned argument and public justification. Ideally, politicians and citizens appeal to shared principles and offer rational explanations for their views. But in practice, many political positions are shaped by self-interest, emotions, or loyalty rather than pure reason. Because admitting these motivations would damage credibility, politicians often present carefully crafted justifications instead. The result is a kind of necessary political pretence. Liberal politics depends on a shared commitment to reasoned deliberation. Yet this very commitment often encourages a subtle form of hypocrisy. Political actors feel compelled to mask their private motivations and speak in the language of public virtue. This is not always deceitful in the malicious sense. Often, it is a form of restraint. It forces people to think through their arguments and frame them in ways that appeal to shared norms. As Ruth Grant notes, this creates a productive tension between ideals and behaviour in liberal democracy, where rhetorical sincerity and political effectiveness rarely align perfectly. Theorists like Machiavelli and Rousseau understood this tension. Machiavelli argued that rulers must sometimes deceive to maintain stability, while Rousseau acknowledged the role of appearances in sustaining public morality. Both saw that politics requires a degree of acting—a performance that allows people to coexist despite conflicting interests. Unlike Adam Smith, who thought transparent appeals to self-interest could replace hypocrisy, they recognised that political life would collapse without some shared illusions. This hypocrisy, while often criticised, can strengthen political discourse. When citizens are expected to offer rational justifications, they are encouraged to engage with others respectfully. The pretence of objectivity helps prevent raw power struggles and keeps the focus on persuasion. Even when arguments are shaped by self-interest, the requirement to express them through public reason helps maintain the appearance—and often the reality—of fairness. There is also a deeper moral dimension to this dynamic. By asking people to defend their views as if they were grounded in shared principles, liberal politics gives moral standards a public role. This is true even when participants fall short of these standards. The demand for justification disciplines political behaviour. It encourages moderation, self-awareness, and the possibility of change. Critics of bourgeois hypocrisy often point out how this kind of moral posturing can become hollow or

[439] Grant, R. (1997) Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics. University of Chicago Press.

even complicit in injustice. They are right to warn against complacency. But rejecting all forms of hypocrisy risks swinging too far in the other direction—toward a cynical politics that ignores virtue entirely. When no one even pretends to care about public principles, the result is not honesty but erosion of the norms that hold democratic life together. Hypocrisy in politics is not simply a weakness. It is a structural feature of systems that rely on mutual respect, deliberation, and persuasion. While it can become corrupt, it also creates space for ethics to matter—even in imperfect forms.

2.3. Paradox of hypocricy

(Living between masks: False selves and moral survival)

'It is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them'.

— Alfred Adler, Understanding Human Nature

'A man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides'.

— André Malraux, Anti-Memoirs

Paradox of hypocrisy

In 'Moral Hypocrisy: Social Psychology and the Study of Virtue[440]'(2008), C. Daniel Batson explores the paradox at the heart of human morality: people want to appear virtuous without necessarily acting virtuously. Drawing on empirical research in social psychology, Batson reveals how individuals often engage in moral hypocrisy—professing ethical principles while violating them when self-interest is at stake—suggesting that the desire to be seen as good can override the desire to do good. Moral hypocrisy is not just a moral failing. It reflects a deeper psychological division. For example, John does not see himself as dishonest or harmful. Instead, he constructs a narrative in which he remains the rational, responsible one, misunderstood by others. What allows him to maintain this illusion is what Freud called disavowal—a way of holding two conflicting beliefs at once, while keeping them apart. John can act immorally without feeling like a bad person, because he refuses to fully confront the contradiction. This process differs from repression. Repression pushes unacceptable thoughts out of awareness. Disavowal, on the other hand, acknowledges them but holds them at a distance. John knows he lied, but insists it was for a good reason. He accepts the fact but denies its meaning. This helps him avoid internal conflict, but at the cost of genuine accountability. Moral hypocrisy is the effort to appear moral without bearing the costs of moral behaviour. It allows someone like John to maintain the appearance of virtue while acting in ways that contradict it. The concern is less about doing right and more about being seen as someone who does. In this light, hypocrisy is a form of self-deception that prioritises image over substance. The connection between hypocrisy and perversion is striking. Both involve a kind of double life, where socially accepted values coexist with secret violations. Arlow's concept of character perversion explains how individuals twist reality to suit their desires, dismissing inconvenient truths through rationalisation. Hypocrisy uses the same mechanism. It is a way of shaping the moral landscape so that one's actions seem justified, even when they clearly are not. John's case shows how hypocrisy functions not only as a mask for others, but as a psychological defence for the self. It protects him from discomfort, shame, and the collapse of his self-image. His sincerity, when it appears, is fleeting and self-serving. He believes just enough to preserve the

[440] Batson, C. D. (2008) Moral Hypocrisy: Social Psychology and the Study of Virtue, University of Notre Dame Press.

illusion. Hypocrisy is less about deception than about survival. It is an attempt to live with contradiction without being undone by it. Yet the cost is high. Relationships built on falsehood, moral growth deferred, and a fractured sense of self. Recognising hypocrisy as a psychological strategy helps explain its persistence, but also its limits.

Hypocrisy and moral authority

In her study 'Hypocrisy and Moral Authority[441]' on moral life, Jessica Isserow explores how hypocrisy weakens the very authority it pretends to uphold. Hypocrisy is more than inconsistency. It points to a deeper problem—an erosion of credibility in those who claim to speak with moral weight. Politicians, priests, teachers, or even friends who ask others to live by standards they ignore themselves become suspect. When words and actions clash in this way, people lose trust. The hypocrite is not just flawed but seen as dangerous to shared moral life. To understand the charge of hypocrisy, Isserow focuses on the idea of moral authority. Some people are recognised, whether formally or informally, as guides in matters of right and wrong. Their words carry weight. These are not simply individuals with ethical knowledge but people whose judgments shape others' actions. They may lead by example, influence group norms, or impose moral expectations. In this role, their integrity becomes central. Hypocrisy, when discovered, shakes that foundation. A moral guide who fails to follow their own rules risks becoming a figure of ridicule or resentment. This is particularly visible in public life. When a politician enforces strict rules but privately breaks them, or when a celebrity promotes a cause while ignoring its principles, the backlash is often swift. It is not just the contradiction that offends—it is the betrayal of a trust. Moral authority is not a neutral position. It is built on the belief that the speaker embodies the values they promote. If that belief crumbles, so does the authority. Isserow argues that even those who reject a person's values can still rightly judge them hypocritical. A secular critic may not accept a religious leader's doctrine, but they can still call out the leader's failure to live by their professed beliefs. This gives hypocrisy a unique role in cross-cultural or pluralistic societies. Even amid disagreement, people can unite in rejecting dishonesty. Hypocrisy becomes a point of contact between opposing views. It draws attention to gaps between ideals and behaviour, forcing conversations about consistency, accountability, and fairness. More than moral failure, hypocrisy is a kind of social betrayal. It affects institutions as well as individuals. When governments or organisations hold themselves up as moral examples while acting in ways that contradict their statements, public trust erodes. Calling out hypocrisy becomes a way to regulate moral authority, not destroy it. It demands coherence, not perfection.

Harming by deceit

In their study 'Harming by Deceit: Epistemic Malevolence and Organisational Wrongdoing[442]', Marco Meyer and Chun Wei Choo examine how some corporations systematically deceive the public in ways that cause serious harm. This kind of deception, which they call 'epistemic malevolence', is not simply about hiding mistakes. It involves a deliberate strategy to mislead others, often by controlling or manipulating information. The authors analysed eighty high-penalty misconduct cases in the United States from 2000 to 2020 and found that this behaviour is not rare. In fact, it was present in most of the cases studied. Two main strategies of deception emerged. One is 'sowing doubt', where an organisation spreads

[441] Isserow, J. and Klein, C. (2017) 'Hypocrisy and Moral Authority', School of Philosophy, Australian National University and Macquarie University.
[442] Meyer, M. and Choo, C.W. (2023) 'Harming by Deceit: Epistemic Malevolence and Organizational Wrongdoing', Journal of Business Ethics, 190(2), pp. 257–275.

uncertainty to confuse or delay scrutiny. The other is 'exploiting trust', which involves the active manipulation of knowledge—concealing, distorting, or falsifying facts that others depend on. While sowing doubt has received more attention in past research, Meyer and Choo found that exploiting trust is more common. This has major consequences for regulation. Efforts to counter misinformation often rely on promoting independent research and debate, but those tools are less effective when organisations are hiding information outright. Epistemic malevolence is not a single act. It is a persistent trait embedded in corporate culture. Organisations with this vice do not just occasionally mislead. They operate on deception as a routine part of their structure. The researchers connect this behaviour to deeper institutional patterns, suggesting that some organisations develop a long-term disposition to mislead to maintain power, avoid accountability, or protect profits. This type of wrongdoing is often invisible to outsiders until significant harm has already occurred. The study also distinguishes epistemic malevolence from other kinds of organisational dishonesty. Some lies may be told to protect others or cover up past harm. But epistemic malevolence is different. It is forward-looking and strategic. It aims to influence decisions by controlling knowledge—convincing people to buy, invest, or act against their own interests based on false or missing information. Examples include car companies cheating emissions tests or drug companies downplaying side effects. The authors introduce a model that explains how epistemic malevolence leads to harm. It begins with a corrupted information environment—either contested, where knowledge is debated, or controlled, where one party dominates access. In the latter case, organisations are more likely to exploit trust. This finding calls for a shift in how regulators think about oversight. Promoting transparency and enforcing disclosure become more urgent when organisations manage the flow of knowledge itself. The study also points to future research needs. The authors caution that their data may reflect reporting biases, since high-penalty cases attract more attention. They also acknowledge that more work is needed to understand how to change these harmful cultures. But the warning is clear: some organisations are not just misinformed or negligent. They are structured to deceive.

Role playing and opinion change

In their study 'The Influence of Role Playing on Opinion Change[443]', Irving L. Janis and Bert T. King examine the effects of role-playing on belief systems. They begin with the observation that individuals often adopt views they do not initially hold when placed in specific social roles. This tendency is seen across education, therapy, leadership training, and counselling. But does publicly arguing for a belief, even one not genuinely held, cause people to adopt it privately? To answer this question, Janis and King designed an experiment involving college students. Participants were split into two groups: one group was instructed to actively present arguments supporting a given viewpoint, while the other group simply listened to the same arguments. The messages concerned plausible but hypothetical future events and were designed to be persuasive without being extreme. All participants were exposed to the same material, ensuring that the only difference was the active or passive nature of their engagement. The results were clear. In two out of three cases, those who played an active role in presenting the arguments showed significantly more change in opinion than those who passively listened. Even when the shift in viewpoint was small, those who had participated in role-playing reported more confidence in their new beliefs. This suggests that the act of speaking in favour of a position can itself lead to deeper acceptance—a finding that supports the idea that saying can

[443] Janis, I. L. and King, B. T. (1954) The Influence of Role Playing on Opinion Change. The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 49(2).

lead to believing. The researchers identified two important conditions that strengthened this effect. First, participants who improvised or elaborated on the arguments, rather than simply reciting a script, showed more change in attitude. This indicates that actively constructing a message lead to a stronger internalisation of its content. Second, those who felt they performed well in their role-playing were more likely to report a shift in opinion. A sense of success or fluency in presenting the viewpoint seemed to validate the opinion for the speaker. The implications of this research are far-reaching. It highlights how public behaviour can influence private beliefs, not just the other way around. People often think of opinion change as a rational process of weighing information. But Janis and King show that the simple act of arguing for a point—even as a role—can reshape internal attitudes. This raises questions about the stability of beliefs and the ease with which social environments can alter them. Their findings also suggest practical applications. Role-playing could be used not only to rehearse arguments or practice communication but as a method for genuine opinion transformation. It may prove especially useful in contexts where shifting beliefs is essential—such as conflict resolution, education, or political engagement. In some cases, the act of role-playing can outweigh the words themselves, as embodying a position can reshape beliefs more powerfully than language alone. By living a role, people may internalise its perspective, turning performance into conviction.

Games as social worlds

In 'Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds[444]', Gary Alan Fine explores how fantasy gaming functions as a microcosm of social life. Although the world of tabletop role-playing games is small and culturally peripheral, it offers a useful lens for understanding how individuals build meaning and identity within voluntary social groups. Fine approaches the subject through the lens of symbolic interactionism, focusing on everyday interactions to grasp how players create and sustain shared realities. His study combines participant observation with interviews, allowing him to examine fantasy gaming not just as entertainment but as a structured social practice shaped by rules, roles, and relationships. Fantasy gaming takes place within what Fine calls an 'urban leisure subculture'. These are voluntary spaces where people seek enjoyment, companionship, and identity through shared activity. In fantasy games, participants build detailed fictional worlds governed by agreed-upon rules. Players inhabit invented characters and develop narratives with the help of a referee or game master. This collective storytelling results in an improvised but structured culture that evolves over time. While it might seem like pure imagination, these worlds are tightly bound by expectations and conventions that guide behaviour and reinforce social norms within the group. A key concept in Fine's study is 'engrossment', the process through which players become absorbed in the game. This involves bracketing real-world identities to step into the fictional world. Players may act as versions of themselves or fully inhabit their character's persona. These choices affect how they relate to the game and to one another. Emotional investment is common, and players often form deep attachments to their characters. This emotional identification adds depth to the experience, making the game more than just a pastime. Fantasy gaming also fulfils the criteria of a subculture. It involves recruitment, shared values, and a degree of separation from mainstream society. While like other subcultures like punk or feminism, it lacks overt political goals. Instead, it focuses on creativity and community, offering players a chance to collaborate and explore shared fantasies. Yet, this open space is not without its exclusions. Fine

[444] Fine, G.A. (1983) Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

notes that these groups are often male-dominated, and gender dynamics within the games can reflect traditional roles and attitudes. Even in imagined worlds, real-world hierarchies and biases persist. The gaming groups themselves are small, overlapping networks that contribute to a larger culture. Status within the group is shaped by age, knowledge, and skill. These hierarchies influence decision-making and narrative direction, adding another layer of realism to the social dynamics. Players work together to build not just stories, but a functioning culture with its own norms and values—what Fine calls 'idioculture'. Finally, the concept of 'frame oscillation' helps link gaming to everyday life. Players shift between identities, just as people in daily life shift between roles—worker, friend, parent. Role-playing games become a rehearsal space for managing these transitions, showing how humans constantly navigate layered realities. In societal, ideological, and political role-playing games, “idioculture” can be engineered to immerse participants in self-contained worlds whose norms and values gradually replace critical thought. Over time, players risk carrying these fabricated rules into real life, becoming “idiots” in the original Greek sense—isolated from the common reality.

Hypocrisy and integrity

In 'Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics[445]', Ruth Grant explores the tension between hypocrisy and integrity in political life. Hypocrisy is often condemned as a form of moral failure—especially in politics, where it is associated with dishonesty and manipulation. Yet, Grant argues that this view is too narrow. In both public and private life, hypocrisy and integrity exist in a complex relationship. Integrity is often praised as the opposite of hypocrisy, but in the political realm, complete transparency or rigid moral consistency may be unworkable or even harmful. Grant draws a distinction between two forms of ethical failure. On one end is the classic hypocrite—the politician or leader who uses the appearance of virtue for personal or political gain. On the other is the 'antihypocrite', someone so committed to moral purity that they refuse all compromise, even when it leads to greater harm. Grant suggests that both extremes miss the point. In politics, where conflicting interests and public roles create constant moral tension, some level of hypocrisy may be unavoidable. The alternative, Grant proposes, is integrity—not in the sense of unbending idealism, but as the ability to hold onto ethical commitments while recognising the need for compromise. Integrity requires judgment. It means knowing when to stand firm and when to bend. This distinction becomes clearer through her comparison of Machiavelli and Rousseau. Machiavelli, in 'The Prince', treats deception as a necessary part of ruling. For him, political success often depends on appearances. He argues that leaders must know how to lie and pretend when the situation demands it. Rousseau, by contrast, is deeply troubled by this logic. Though he recognises the role of hypocrisy in politics, he warns that it can destroy the moral core of public life if left unchecked. Rousseau values sincerity but also acknowledges that ideal purity is difficult to maintain in practice. Grant shows how Rousseau’s critique of moderation challenges liberal democracies. These systems often pride themselves on honesty and transparency, yet their structures create strong incentives for hypocrisy. Politicians must manage public opinion, build coalitions, and navigate institutional pressures—all of which encourage strategic compromise and the concealment of true motives. In this context, Rousseau’s concern is that liberal societies may deceive themselves into thinking they are more virtuous than they are. At the same time, Rousseau does not call for radical purity. His version of integrity accepts the realities of politics but insists on moral vigilance. He urges political actors to be conscious of the compromises they make and to avoid

[445] Grant, R. (1997) Machiavelli, Rousseau, and the Ethics of Politics*. University of Chicago Press.

losing sight of their ethical aims. Hypocrisy, for Rousseau, is not just a failure to practice what one preaches—it is a failure to see that one has abandoned the ideals altogether.

Do as I say (not as I do)

In 'Do As I Say (Not As I Do)[446]', Peter Schweizer examines a troubling pattern among high-profile liberals who preach progressive values while living in contradiction to them. His focus is not simply on the failure to practice what one preaches, but on the systemic way in which public moralising is often used as a political weapon, while personal lives tell a different story. Schweizer opens by acknowledging that hypocrisy is a charge often aimed at conservatives—highlighting scandals like Rush Limbaugh's addiction or Dr. Laura Schlessinger's youthful photos—but he points out that these critics rarely apply the same scrutiny to liberal figures who exhibit similar, or worse, contradictions. Liberal commentators often excuse their inconsistency by claiming their positions are more nuanced or flexible. But as Schweizer argues, many liberals adopt strong, absolutist positions on issues like labour rights, environmentalism, and racial equality. Despite this, their actions frequently reveal a disregard for those very principles. Terry McAuliffe, for example, was an advocate for organised labour but failed to use union workers in his private business. Likewise, advocates of affirmative action in Congress did not apply those standards in their own hiring practices, employing minorities at rates no better than their conservative counterparts. The contradictions become even starker in Schweizer's profile of Noam Chomsky. Long revered as a radical critic of capitalism, militarism, and American foreign policy, Chomsky's public identity rests on moral opposition to these structures. Yet his personal finances and professional history tell a different story. Much of his early linguistic research was funded by the Pentagon, and he continues to benefit from royalties, property holdings, and tax strategies common among the wealthy. He denounces corporate America but holds investments in companies tied to industries he publicly opposes. His willingness to accept funding and protections from the very system he condemns raises serious questions about the sincerity of his political stance. Schweizer also notes how Chomsky, a fierce defender of free speech, has stayed silent or even expressed admiration for regimes like Cuba or Vietnam, where dissent is suppressed. This inconsistency, according to Schweizer, is not accidental. It reflects a deeper trend among liberal elites who use radical rhetoric to build their personal brand while avoiding the real costs of living by their ideals. The broader point is not to claim that conservatives are morally superior, but to expose a specific type of liberal hypocrisy: one that gains social, political, and even financial capital through public moralising while privately benefitting from the very systems it condemns. This hypocrisy is not just personal—it shapes public discourse, misleads young people, and distorts policy debates. The call to action is simple: political speech should not be immune to scrutiny. Those who demand change should be held to the same standards they set for others.

EdSpeak and Doubletalk

In 'EdSpeak and Doubletalk[447]', Diane Ravitch and Nancy E. Bailey confront the growing misuse of language in the world of public education. Education, like many professions, has its own specialised vocabulary. But unlike law or medicine, the terms used in schooling affect every citizen. Still, most people are left out of the conversation due to the jargon-heavy and often misleading language used in policy discussions. The original EdSpeak, written in 2006,

[446] Schweizer, P. (2005) Do As I Say (Not As I Do): Profiles in Liberal Hypocrisy*. New York: Doubleday.
[447] Ravitch, D. and Bailey, N.E. (2020) EdSpeak and Doubletalk: A Glossary to Decipher Hypocrisy and Save Public Schooling. New York: Teachers College Press.

was meant to help readers decode this language. Over time, however, the terms have multiplied and shifted, often more influenced by marketing than by educational substance. Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act under George W. Bush, education policy has become increasingly centralised and politicised. That law introduced federal mandates that tied school performance to standardised testing. The Obama administration followed with Race to the Top, which doubled down on testing and promoted charter schools. Under Trump, the push for school choice and privatisation intensified. Throughout this process, politicians and reformers cloaked controversial policies in vague or appealing language that hid their real effects. Terms like 'accountability', 'standards', and 'choice' sound neutral or even positive, but they often signal top-down control, budget cuts, or the weakening of public education. 'Students First' is a phrase that seems supportive of children but is often used to justify attacks on teachers. 'Personalised learning' might suggest one-on-one attention, but it usually means a child sits alone in front of a screen, following a program designed by a tech company. These examples show how the language of reform can distort public perception and block meaningful debate. What Ravitch and Bailey argue is that this rhetorical manipulation is not accidental. It is part of a deliberate strategy by wealthy donors, private foundations, and political groups to reshape public education according to market principles. These actors frame public schools as 'failing' and propose reforms that open the door to privatisation. The problem, as the authors explain, is not with the teachers or the system itself, but with poverty, inequality, and underinvestment. Yet those issues are rarely addressed directly. Instead, the language focuses blame on schools and teachers, setting the stage for interventions that rarely help and often harm. The book also critiques how the media reinforces this language. Reforms are often covered with glowing headlines and little scepticism. Meanwhile, the actual impact on communities, especially low-income and marginalised ones, is ignored. The shift from local to federal control, and from public oversight to private influence, has been masked by a steady stream of doubletalk. 'EdSpeak and Doubletalk' is not just a glossary. It is a political and social warning. But calls for honesty and transparency in educational language have long since been drowned out by an ever more politicised and agenda-driven discourse, where jargon serves power rather than truth. Trapped in this EdSpeak labyrinth, there is no clear way out—only endless rewording that conceals the same agendas..

Impact of hypocrisy on opinion

In group settings, individuals often find themselves caught between what they believe privately and what they express publicly. This dissonance—commonly referred to as hypocrisy—can subtly shape how opinions spread through a group. In 'The impact of hypocrisy on opinion formation [448]' Michael T. Gastner and his collaborators present a mathematical model that explores how these internal and external layers of opinion interact and affect the path to group consensus. The model they use is called the Concealed Voter Model (CVM). It allows for the presence of 'hypocrites', or individuals whose public expressions do not match their private beliefs. What the researchers find is that hypocrisy slows down consensus without entirely preventing it. The process unfolds in two distinct phases. First, a fast alignment where the number of hypocrites stabilises. Then, a much slower drift as the group gradually settles on a common opinion. Despite its delaying effect, the level of hypocrisy in the group does not significantly change how long it takes to reach consensus. What matters more is the original balance of opinions. This distinction challenges some assumptions about how opinion dynamics

[448] Gastner, M.T. et al. (2019) .The impact of hypocrisy on opinion formation: A dynamic model. PLOS ONE, 14(6), p.e0218729. doi:https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0218729.

work. It suggests that the simple presence of hidden views does not carry as much weight in determining outcomes as the initial distribution of those views. Hypocrisy acts more like background noise than a decisive force. Still, the effects are not trivial. Because individuals may feel pressure to hide their true beliefs, it becomes harder to measure what a group thinks. This is particularly relevant in political polling, courtroom deliberations, and public debates, where voiced opinions may not fully reflect deeper convictions. A key insight of the study is that hypocrisy emerges from the clash between social norms and personal beliefs. When institutions reward conformity, people may suppress disagreement and appear aligned with majority views. This pressure fuels internalisation, where people adopt the public stance over time. On the other hand, when self-expression is encouraged, people are more likely to share their honest views. In such cases, the group's movement toward consensus slows down even further, preserving diversity of opinion. The study also notes that group size and structure matter. In larger populations, consensus takes longer simply because there are more opinions to process. Additionally, the network through which individuals interact can amplify or dampen the effects of hypocrisy. These complexities suggest that real-world opinion formation may follow slower, less predictable paths than surface-level data reveals. In conclusion, Gastner's model reveals that hypocrisy, while delaying group consensus, does not fundamentally alter its direction. What matters most is the starting balance of opinions. However, because hypocrisy clouds the visibility of those opinions, it poses challenges for those trying to gauge public sentiment. Encouraging honest expression may slow the process, but it ensures that consensus, when reached, is more reflective of genuine belief.

Why do we hate hypocrites?

Hypocrisy provokes a stronger emotional reaction than simple dishonesty. People often dislike hypocrites more than liars. But why is this the case? According to Jillian J. Jordan in 'Why Do We Hate Hypocrites? Evidence for a Theory of False Signalling[449]', the key lies not in the immorality of the hypocrite's actions but in the way, hypocrisy misleads others. Specifically, it sends a false signal—a public condemnation of bad behaviour—that implies the speaker behaves better than they do. This false signal distorts how people perceive the hypocrite. By condemning a behaviour, the person implies they do not engage in it themselves. This is a powerful signal, stronger even than making a direct claim about one's own morality. Across a series of studies, Jordan shows that when people issue moral judgments, observers assume those individuals act morally in the future. That trust is undermined when the moraliser turns out to be guilty of the same behaviour. In the first two studies, participants saw moral condemnation as a more reliable indicator of someone's character than self-praise. Simply put, people believe actions speak louder than words—and moral condemnation is a kind of action. In a third study, participants were asked to judge different kinds of moral offenders. Hypocrites were viewed more harshly than outright liars and those who committed the same acts without condemning others. The reason? Hypocrites not only break the rules but do so while pretending to uphold them. One might think that honesty could redeem the hypocrite. In a fourth study, Jordan examined whether admitting to wrongdoing changes how people judge hypocrisy. It turns out that 'honest hypocrites'—those who admit they have done what they condemn—are seen much more positively. They no longer send a false signal. Their condemnation is no longer misleading because they openly acknowledge their fault. This confirms that the real problem is not bad behaviour but the illusion of moral superiority. However, Study 5 complicates this.

[449] Jordan, J. J. (2017) 'Why Do We Hate Hypocrites? Evidence for a Theory of False Signaling', Psychological Science, 28(3), pp. 356–368.

Hypocrites who confess to unrelated bad behaviour—say, lying in one context while condemning stealing in another—are still judged negatively. That is because their condemnation still falsely signals, they avoid the specific behaviour they attack. The signal remains deceptive even if some other truth is admitted. Jordan's findings challenge the idea that people dislike hypocrisy purely because it involves inconsistency. Instead, hypocrisy is more about manipulation—specifically, manipulating others' perceptions of moral character. The condemnation is not wrong. What matters is that it misleads.

Specter of hypocrisy

Hypocrisy haunts public life. It is not just a personal flaw, but a deep moral concern embedded in political speech and social judgment. When someone is called a hypocrite, the accusation strikes at their integrity. It implies not only inconsistency but a betrayal of shared norms. As Raphael Sassower explains in 'Testing the Limits of Moral Discourse[450]', this charge carries weight because it appeals to common values—truthfulness, fairness, and authenticity. In politics, where contradiction often goes unchecked, calling out hypocrisy can still force accountability. It pushes both individuals and institutions to reflect on the principles they claim to uphold. The term hypocrisy stems from Greek and Hebrew roots that suggest performance and concealment. In Greek, it referred to acting behind a mask. In Hebrew, it hints at blending in, like a chameleon. This dual heritage shows that hypocrisy can be both a deliberate cover and a subtle adaptation. Sassower uses this insight to explore how moral discourse operates in contemporary America. Hypocrisy is not just about saying one thing and doing another. It is also about hiding behind language that claims virtue while protecting vice. This tension became stark during the COVID-19 pandemic. The U.S. government spoke of liberty and resilience, but its actions often betrayed marginalised communities. The rhetoric of freedom was used to justify neglect. Essential workers, many of them undocumented, were praised while being exposed to harm. The pandemic revealed how moral language can be used to obscure injustice. Hypocrisy here was not only individual but structural woven into the very fabric of policy and public relations. Sassower connects this with the deeper history of American contradiction. A nation founded on liberty also depended on slavery. Democratic ideals coexisted with violent exclusions. Today, similar contradictions persist. Political leaders invoke fairness while enacting policies that deepen inequality. In this context, the charge of hypocrisy becomes a form of critique. It highlights the gap between what is said and what is done. But it also risks being reduced to a rhetorical weapon, losing its moral force if overused or ignored. Sassower's book traces this tension across philosophy, politics, psychology, and religion. In philosophy, he notes, hypocrisy challenges the binary of truth and lies. It exists in the grey space of performance and rationalisation. Politically, it reflects the calculated use of moral language for strategic ends. Psychologically, it points to the fragmented self, pulled between ideals and reality. Religiously, hypocrisy is condemned as a failure of faith and sincerity. Across these fields, the pattern remains: hypocrisy disrupts trust and corrodes meaning. In the end, Sassower suggests that calling out hypocrisy is more than a moral gesture. It is a way of defending shared values in the face of deception. The spectre of hypocrisy will not vanish, but its power lies in reminding society of its better self. To name hypocrisy is to insist that actions should match principles, and that moral speech must not be reduced to performance.

[450] Sassower, R. (2021) Testing the Limits of Moral Discourse, London: Routledge.

Perspectival truths

In 'Perspectival Realism [451]' Michela Massimi offers a way to understand truth that avoids both rigid realism and total relativism. Her idea of 'truth within a perspective' helps make sense of how science can speak about reality even when its claims change over time. Drawing on Nietzsche's notion that truth is never neutral but always shaped by context, Massimi also insists that reality itself is not up for grabs. There is a world outside our perspectives, but how we access it depends on where we are looking from. She challenges the belief in a neutral 'view from nowhere', arguing that scientific claims are always made from within specific contexts. These include not only the theories and instruments used, but also the historical moment in which scientists work. Still, this does not mean truth is just a social construct. Nature, according to Massimi, does not change because our theories do. Our views of it shift, but the thing observed remains. To make this more precise, Massimi introduces the idea of 'perspective-sensitivity'. This means that every scientific theory or model defines its own conditions for what counts as true. But these conditions are not arbitrary. They are shaped by real constraints—empirical data, conceptual coherence, and predictive success. Science is not about creating fantasies; it is about building models that work within a world that resists falsehoods. She compares this to map-making: every map is partial, but still useful. No one expects a perfect map of the whole world, but good maps help us navigate real terrain. Scientific knowledge, in her view, is made up of these partial yet successful representations of reality. While no single perspective captures everything, the accumulation and comparison of different perspectives bring us closer to a richer understanding of the world. This idea also draws on Karl Popper's view of science as a process of critical comparison among competing theories, each shaped by its own context. In today's world, where truth is often politicised or dismissed, Massimi's approach offers an important middle ground. Her perspectival realism recognises that truth claims are context-bound but not meaningless. They can still be assessed, criticised, and improved. This is vital in the so-called post-truth era, where the idea of truth itself is often undermined. Instead of choosing between blind faith in objectivity or a cynical embrace of relativism, she asks us to engage with truth as an evolving, collaborative effort. In conclusion, Massimi's perspectival truth bridges the gap between context and objectivity. It accepts that knowledge is situated yet insists that nature does not bend to every belief. Scientific inquiry becomes a practice of tracing stable patterns through changing perspectives. In an age where facts are contested and certainty is rare; this model invites a more responsible and careful way to think about truth.

Necessary hypocrisy

What keeps organisations alive is often not what textbooks suggest. Efficiency, clear hierarchy, and consistency are commonly cited as vital traits for success. But real-world organisations show something else. They survive and thrive not by strictly following these ideals but by adjusting to competing and often conflicting demands. In 'The Organisation of Hypocrisy[452]' Nils Brunsson calls this adjustment 'necessary hypocrisy'. Organisations must appeal to outside observers—governments, investors, the public—to gain legitimacy and support. To do this, they often adopt structures and routines that appear rational and progressive. They speak the language of social responsibility, transparency, or innovation. But many of these practices serve more as symbolic gestures than functional tools. Activities like staff

[451] Massimi, M. (2022) Perspectival Realism, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[452] Brunsson, N. (2002) The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organizations, Copenhagen Business School Press.

consultations or strategic planning sessions often have little to do with real decision-making. They are rituals, carried out to present an image of order and compliance. Brunsson argues that a gap develops between what organisations say and what they do. This split between formal representation and actual behaviour is not accidental. It is built into how organisations function. Formal structures exist to satisfy external expectations, while informal routines take care of internal coordination and practical needs. By separating these two levels, organisations create the flexibility to oversee competing demands. For instance, one part of an organisation might appear centralised to impress regulators, while another operates in a decentralised way to respond quickly to customer needs. This disconnection, or hypocrisy, allows organisations to respond to inconsistent norms. Modern societies demand both equality and leadership, both innovation and stability. No single action or value can satisfy all of these at once. To cope, organisations may offer one set of messages in their public statements, follow a different set when making decisions, and act on yet another when implementing change. This strategy may look dishonest, but it is often the only way to balance survival with legitimacy. Brunsson emphasises that this is not a failure of ethics or leadership. It is a rational response to a complex world. The word 'hypocrisy' usually carries a moral judgment. But in this context, it is a structural necessity. Organisations must navigate a web of expectations that cannot all be satisfied at the same time. Hypocrisy becomes a method of survival rather than a moral failing. In conclusion, the success of organisations often depends on their ability to act in contradictory ways. Hypocrisy allows them to appear consistent with societal norms while adapting internally to the realities of business. This necessary gap between appearance and action is not a flaw in modern institutions—it is one of their most effective tools for managing complexity and change.

3. DECEPTION

3.1. Art of deception

(Crafted illusions: The aesthetics and ethics of disinformation)

'Self-deception is not merely a trait of the coward; it is a condition of survival'.

Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death

'The essence of lying is in deception, not in words'.

— John Ruskin, The Crown of Wild Olive

The word made war

In times of war, the battlefield is only the visible surface of a much deeper conflict—one fought in language, memory, and belief. Long before the first soldier is deployed, the machinery of war begins to turn through carefully crafted narratives and strategic deceit. The adage that 'truth is the first casualty of war' captures this enduring reality: no war can begin without propaganda, and no army marches without a story. Modern conflicts, especially in democratic societies, must be justified not only militarily but morally. Citizens must be convinced, not coerced, and that persuasion begins with mythmaking. The use of deception in war is not accidental—it is essential. From ancient stratagems to modern psy-ops, lies and misdirection have always been tactical tools. As the saying goes, men lie most when they are hunting or at war, because both require concealing one’s true intentions. Military language reflects this: 'the

fog of war' evokes not just confusion but the intentional clouding of facts. 'The ruse of war' is not an exception but a legitimised form of deception. In war, lying is not a moral failure—it is doctrine. But beyond the battlefield, the most insidious lies are those told at home. A war cannot be sustained without public support, and no mother willingly sends her son to die without believing he is protecting something sacred. That is why war is always framed as defence, never aggression. Governments rarely admit to economic motives, strategic interests, or geopolitical games; instead, they invoke freedom, justice, and national survival. These are the noble lies—words with symbolic weight that reframe complex conflicts into clear moral binaries. This process is not about clarity but about control: control over how war is understood, remembered, and morally judged. This is why war is always accompanied by media campaigns, speeches, and images—language becomes the weapon that softens resistance and manufactures consent. Each side tells a version of the story where it is the victim or the liberator, never the aggressor. These narratives often outlive the war itself, becoming part of national identity and historical memory. The power of propaganda lies not in its loudness but in its repetition. Say something long enough, across enough channels, and it becomes not a message but a reflex. Just as Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell, propaganda conditions populations to respond to words and images with automatic emotional reactions. Terms like 'terrorist', 'hero', 'freedom', or even specific names—Rodney King, George Floyd, Greta Thunberg—come pre-loaded with meaning, emotion, and allegiance. The manipulation of language does not just distort reality—it reshapes perception until people no longer question what they are told. They repeat slogans, adopt talking points, and share content that aligns with pre-constructed narratives. In this sense, modern warfare is not just kinetic—it is cognitive. The real power lies not in bombs but in the ability to control discourse. Whoever defines the terms defines the war. And in the end, the most powerful weapon is not the gun, but the story that makes its use seem necessary. From slogan to slaughter, the tongue draws blood long before the sword.

Military deception

Military deception is the deliberate act of misleading an adversary to gain a strategic or tactical advantage. Rather than simply hiding the truth, it involves actively presenting false information to influence enemy behaviour. While operations security focuses on concealing real capabilities and plans, deception shapes what the enemy thinks those capabilities and plans are. It creates an artificial 'fog of war', often using psychological tactics, visual illusions, fake signals, and carefully crafted misinformation. Deception can either confuse or mislead. One method increases ambiguity by overwhelming the enemy with too many possibilities. Another narrows their focus, making them confident in a specific—but wrong—interpretation. Both techniques were used in Operation Bodyguard during World War II. First, the Allies hinted at multiple invasion points, then zeroed in on Pas-de-Calais, misleading German forces and facilitating the Normandy landings. Several key tactics have defined successful deception. Feints involve physical attacks meant to distract. Demonstrations show force without engaging. Ruses involve planting false information, as in Operation Mincemeat, where a corpse carrying fake invasion plans diverted German defences. Static displays, such as inflatable tanks or dummy camps, also play a role. These tactics work best when they support an already plausible story or reinforce the enemy’s expectations—a rule known as Magruder’s Principle. Legitimate deception has limits. Under international law, especially the Geneva Conventions, deceit that misuses protected signs or promises of good faith—such as faking surrender—is forbidden. Deception must never cross into perfidy. Successful military deception follows a structured planning process. U.S. doctrine frames it around an enemy’s 'see-think-do' cycle. First, define what action the adversary should take. Then identify the belief that would prompt that action.

Finally, design false signals to shape that belief. For example, to keep German troops away from Normandy, the Allies made Hitler believe an invasion would strike Calais. They supported this belief with fake radio traffic, dummy units, and double agents. History is filled with examples of military deception. Ancient generals like Thutmose III and Alexander the Great used tricks to gain entry to cities or surprise enemy forces. The Trojan Horse is the most famous example—an offering hiding Greek soldiers, brought into Troy under false pretences. From Mongol feigned retreats to British dummy tanks in World War II, deception has repeatedly proven its value. Modern conflicts have also featured elaborate deception. In 1991's Gulf War, coalition forces faked a frontal assault while launching a flanking manoeuvre known as the 'Left Hook'. In 2023, Hamas rehearsed openly and used civilian vehicles in a way that lulled Israeli forces into misreading their true intent. Across history, from wooden horses to digital signals, the core strategy remains unchanged: lead the enemy to misjudge reality. In conclusion, military deception is not just about tricks—it is a methodical, strategic process that uses the enemy's assumptions against them. It exploits human psychology, gaps in intelligence, and the natural tendency to trust what seems familiar. When used ethically and skilfully, it becomes a powerful tool in shaping the course of conflict.

Denial and deception

Denial and Deception (D&D) describe a dual strategy of misdirection used in both military and political contexts. The terms gained prominence in the 1980s as part of a Western theoretical framework that formalised how states manipulate what adversaries perceive. The concept draws on older traditions like Soviet 'maskirovka', but offers a clearer distinction between denial—concealing truth—and deception—projecting falsehood. Denial is passive. It includes securing communications, camouflaging military movements, or restricting information to a need-to-know basis. Its aim is to prevent opponents from discovering actual plans. Deception, on the other hand, is active. It involves constructing a false version of reality. This might include planting misleading stories in the media, staging fake troop deployments, or leaking fabricated diplomatic signals. Both denial and deception are most effective when coordinated toward a single objective, reinforcing one another to influence enemy decisions. History offers compelling examples. Before the Pearl Harbor attack, Japan used denial by changing naval call signs and restricting movement data. At the same time, it deployed deception by announcing the sailing of a passenger liner to California, suggesting evacuation rather than war. The success of this combination rested on coherence—any inconsistency might have exposed the plan. Political theorists like John Mearsheimer have explored how these strategies operate in democratic societies. In 'Why Leaders Lie[453]', he argues that deception works better within democracies than between states, because domestic trust can be exploited. Leaders often lie not to foreign rivals, but to their own populations, as seen in the Bush administration's campaign leading to the 2003 Iraq War. Public trust was instrumental in convincing Americans of a threat that did not exist. Abram Shulsky, a specialist in intelligence policy, notes that liberal democracies face institutional limits on deception. Free media, legal checks, and public scrutiny reduce the space for extensive manipulation—except in wartime. By contrast, authoritarian states can apply denial and deception freely, both internally and externally. Terrorist organisations and non-state actors also use D&D tactics, often blending into civilian populations or staging propaganda events to mislead governments and publics alike. The U.S. Department of Defense includes both elements under the broader category of

[453] Mearsheimer, J. (2011) Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics. New York: Oxford University Press.

military deception. It distinguishes between passive denial—hiding facts—and active deception—providing false signals. Canadian officer John M. Roach emphasises this distinction: withholding data is denial, feeding wrong data is deception. Western doctrine, while influenced by Soviet practice, integrates legal and ethical boundaries, particularly in avoiding perfidy. Other cultures and traditions have developed their own versions of D&D. Islamic military theory contains terms like kitman and iham, referring to concealment and misdirection. In Chinese thought, deception is elevated to an art form, with strategies designed not only to confuse but to seduce the enemy into self-defeat. Denial and deception form two pillars of strategic secrecy. Denial hides reality; deception fabricates it. When combined skilfully, they shape an adversary's understanding and actions without direct confrontation. In war, diplomacy, and politics, the power to control perception remains one of the most effective—and dangerous—tools of influence. Walter Lippmann noted that the propaganda machinery built during World War I did not end with the fighting. In 'Public Opinion' (1922), drawing on his time in the U.S. Committee on Public Information, he described how wartime methods—reducing issues to moral absolutes, demonising enemies, glorifying allies, and appealing to emotion over fact—were too effective to abandon. After the armistice, governments, businesses, and political movements kept using them. Propaganda became, in his words, "a regular organ of popular government." What had once mobilised nations for war now managed opinion in peace, shaping a manufactured consent that threatened independent judgment.

False flag, agent provocateur, and red herring

False flags, agent provocateurs, and red herrings are distinct but overlapping forms of deception. Each manipulates trust, perception, and context to create false impressions, distract audiences, or incite actions. These tactics are common not only in war and espionage but also in politics, law enforcement, and ideological campaigns. False flag operations present themselves as the work of an opponent to discredit or provoke a reaction. In political campaigning, false flag tactics may include posing as supporters of an opposing candidate, spreading disinformation, or staging events designed to cause backlash. The 'Canuck letter', a forged message meant to damage a candidate's reputation during the 1972 U.S. election, is one example. More recently, online strategies have been used to impersonate rival groups. During the 2018 U.S. midterms, pipe bomb mailings sparked speculation about false flag intent, though the perpetrator was acting from genuine hostility. In Canada's 2025 campaign, Liberal operatives planted 'Stop the Steal' buttons at a Conservative rally, trying to associate their opponents with foreign conspiracy narratives. When the ploy was revealed, the staffers were quietly reassigned. Agent provocateurs operate by inciting unlawful or damaging actions from within a group, typically to undermine it or justify repression. The term comes from 19th-century France and was later applied to tactics used by secret police and intelligence services worldwide. Governments have often used provocateurs to discredit protest movements or labour unions. In Canada, officers disguised as protesters were identified during the 2007 Montebello summit. In the U.S., the FBI's COINTELPRO program infiltrated civil rights and activist groups, using provocateurs to encourage infighting or radicalisation. Entrapment defences arise when the induced act would not have occurred without the provocateur's pressure, raising legal and ethical concerns. Red herrings, unlike the other two, are logical or rhetorical diversions. They shift attention away from the core issue, often using unrelated or superficially relevant information. A red herring might be introduced intentionally, to confuse or delay, or unintentionally, through poor reasoning. In politics, budget arguments may be used to derail debates about social policy. In mystery novels, red herrings mislead both the characters and readers. Sherlock Holmes stories often rely on this device, drawing attention to false clues

before revealing the true solution. The phrase itself comes from a story by William Cobbett, who described misleading hounds with a smoked fish—though the tale was more political metaphor than historical fact. All three tactics rely on misdirection. False flags invent opponents' actions. Agent provocateurs engineer misconduct. Red herrings redirect debate. Each undermines transparency and reasoned discourse. Used strategically, they shape public perception and influence events while hiding true motives. In an age of rapid communication and digital manipulation, these tactics will be used as long as they remain effective, even when recognised—making awareness the only defence until their power fades.

Guide to lies and statistics

In a world saturated with information, it has never been more urgent to understand how to evaluate what is true. In 'A Field Guide to Lies and Statistics: A Neuroscientist on How to Make Sense of a Complex World[454]' Daniel Levitin argues that although access to data has increased, the ability to critically assess it has not. People are surrounded by pseudo-facts, false statistics, and misleading arguments. Some of this misinformation is spread deliberately. Much of it, however, is shared carelessly—by individuals or institutions that fail to verify the accuracy of what they pass on. One of the main tools of deception is statistics. Numbers give the illusion of certainty and authority. But they are only as honest as their sources and interpretations. Levitin reminds readers that statistics can easily mislead. For instance, wild claims—such as marijuana use doubling every year for decades—collapse when examined closely. Small percentages can also be inflated to sound alarming. A slight increase in a rare event may be framed as an epidemic. These manipulations shape how people perceive danger, success, or social change. Visual data can be just as misleading. Charts and graphs often distort reality. A pie chart, for example, must total 100 percent, yet even mainstream media have broadcast visuals that exceed this, confusing rather than informing. Similarly, changing the scale of a bar graph or omitting data can push a narrative without overtly lying. This subtle manipulation influences public opinion in ways that feel natural and convincing. Language plays a powerful role in shaping understanding. Certain words are emotionally charged, and their use can bias interpretation. Welfare policies, public health issues, or crime rates are often discussed in terms that suggest causation where there is only correlation. Misusing or misrepresenting definitions—such as confusing 'mortality rate' with 'survival rate'—can shift how people respond to medical or social information. Recognising these linguistic tricks is key to identifying when one is being nudged rather than informed. Levitin emphasises the importance of recognising credible sources. Not all expertise is equal. A scientist in one field is not necessarily an authority in another. Public figures, celebrities, and even prize-winning intellectuals often speak outside their area of knowledge. Trust must be earned through transparency and evidence, not reputation alone. The internet complicates this further. Domains like .org or .com may appear authoritative, but many are created to mislead. Deceptive sites are used by political campaigns, corporations, or advocacy groups to sway opinion. Even peer-reviewed studies can be flawed due to funding biases or selective reporting. Levitin urges readers to examine not only the claims being made but how they are presented. This includes understanding who benefits from a particular conclusion and whether multiple, independent sources support it. The goal is not to distrust everything, but to develop habits of careful inspection. In conclusion, critical thinking is a survival skill in the information age. Levitin's message is clear: question statistics, examine language, verify sources, and consider the intent behind the message. Believing without reflection leads to error, while thoughtful scepticism

[454] Levitin, D. (2016) A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking in the Information Age. Penguin.

helps people see beyond manipulation and make informed choices. In mass media, statistics often become a fast-selling form of deception—condensing complex, incomprehensible data into colourful, simplified graphics that persuade quickly while quietly distorting the truth.

"A well-wrapped statistic is better than Hitler's "big lie" it misleads, yet it cannot be pinned on you."

— Darrell Huff, How to Lie with Statistics (1954)

Evaluating the world

Understanding the world requires more than gathering facts—it requires thinking clearly about how those facts are interpreted. Some say that rational thinking is a way of trying not to fool yourself, because you are the easiest person to fool. This point reflects the broader challenge of modern life: sorting truth from error in a world flooded with information. In 'A Field Guide to Lies', Daniel Levitin echoes this concern, offering tools to help people navigate misleading claims, flawed arguments, and the frequent misuse of numbers and logic. Science has advanced human knowledge through its insistence on evidence, replication, and scepticism. Yet even scientific research is vulnerable to manipulation. Fraud is rare, but it happens—Andrew Wakefield's infamous study claiming a link between the MMR vaccine and autism is a cautionary example. Though debunked, the damage lingers. More often, distortions arise from poor methodology, biased sampling, or cherry-picked results. That is why science does not rely on single studies. It depends on repeated experiments and meta-analyses that evaluate claims across time and context. Scientific reasoning operates through deduction, induction, and abduction. Deduction begins with general rules and leads to specific conclusions. If the premises are true, the conclusion must follow. Induction works the other way—observing patterns and inferring general principles. It is useful, but never certain. Abduction suggests the best possible explanation for incomplete data. This is how people often reason in daily life—trying to make sense of events using the most plausible story available. Despite these methods, humans make predictable thinking errors. One common mistake is finding connections where none exist. Thinking about someone just before they call feels like a coincidence with meaning, but we forget all the other times we thought about someone and nothing happened. Probability misleads us when we focus only on what did happen, ignoring all that did not. Risk is also frequently misunderstood. After the 9/11 attacks, fear of flying pushed people toward car travel, which carries a higher risk of fatality. Emotion can overpower logic. Marketers and politicians exploit this by using statistics without context. A company might say, '90% of solved break-ins involve security cameras', suggesting cameras solve crimes. But the real question—how many crimes remain unsolved even with video—goes unanswered. Visuals make this worse. Graphs with distorted axes, misleading proportions, or missing data can shape opinions with a glance. Pie charts that add up to more than 100% or bar charts that exaggerate differences are not just errors—they are strategies to manipulate. Changing minds is hard. Once someone accepts a belief, it tends to stick. Even when faced with strong counterevidence, people often rationalise or reject it. This belief perseverance is reinforced by confirmation bias—seeking out information that supports existing views and ignoring what contradicts them. In conclusion, evaluating the world calls for more than consuming information. It requires thinking about how knowledge is formed, evaluated, and sometimes twisted. Rational analysis, not passive reception, is what helps people navigate complexity without losing clarity. At the end rational thinking is also the easiest way to fool yourself because you are the easiest person to fool.

Invented knowledge

When people lose the ability to understand their past through reliable history, they often turn to myths. In 'Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-Religions [455]' Ronald H. Fritze argues, this tendency to embrace false stories is not new. In the 19th century, Americans told themselves that a mysterious white race had built the ancient mounds across the Midwest and had been wiped out by Native Americans. This fiction helped justify the displacement and mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. Other tales, like the idea that the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel once lived in North America, gained popularity, and fed national pride. Pseudohistory has not disappeared. On the contrary, it has become more widespread in the age of mass media and the internet. Radio shows, TV series, and websites promote outlandish stories of ancient aliens, lost continents, and secret histories. Films like '10,000 BC' and 'Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull' blur the line between fact and fantasy. Books such as 'The Da Vinci Code' are treated by some as genuine historical accounts, despite their fictional status. The success of such narratives, both culturally and commercially, shows how easily misinformation can become mainstream. This phenomenon can be dangerous. Holocaust denial, for example, has persisted despite overwhelming evidence and legal rulings. The historian David Irving lost a libel case after being exposed by Deborah Lipstadt as a falsifier of history. Yet denial continues, especially where political ideologies fuel it. Pseudohistory has often served racist or nationalist goals. Nazi Germany used myths of Aryan superiority and lost civilisations to promote its ideology. In India, Tamil nationalists have cited the lost land of Lemuria to support their political claims. These distorted accounts are not mere academic curiosities; they shape identity and justify real-world actions. Fritze draws a line between genuine historical revision and pseudohistory. The former is a normal part of scholarly work, where new evidence can change interpretations. Pseudohistory, by contrast, ignores evidence. It relies on selective data, appeals to emotion, and conspiratorial thinking. Its authors often emerge from a fringe culture that circulates discredited theories—Atlantis, aliens, secret bloodlines—without any rigorous standard of proof. One reason for the growth of pseudohistory is the breakdown of authority in the information age. Anyone can publish. Anyone can claim expertise. Some embrace pseudohistory as a kind of secular religion, offering meaning in a confusing world. Theories by authors like Erich von Däniken resemble science fiction more than scholarship, often echoing themes from writers like H. P. Lovecraft. These stories are grand and mysterious, offering hidden truths that the mainstream allegedly suppresses. They attract loyal audiences who dismiss critics as part of the conspiracy. Another tactic of pseudohistorians is to confuse myth with fact. They often revive the ancient idea of euhemerism, which treats myths as distorted memories of real events. Anything that could have happened is treated as likely to have happened. Gavin Menzies, for instance, argued that Chinese fleets visited America long before Columbus, based on questionable sources. These authors do not just interpret facts differently; they question the facts themselves. The genre thrives on spectacle. Lost civilisations, hidden relics, and mysterious symbols make for compelling stories. Its authors often present themselves as lone voices of truth, standing against the academic elite. They publish bestselling books, appear on TV, and gain massive followings. Many are true believers. Others clearly know they are manipulating their audiences. Either way, the result is the same: widespread confusion about what happened in the past. Pseudohistory is not harmless. It misleads people, fuels prejudice and weakens trust in genuine scholarship. It has been used to justify violence, discrimination, and war. It spreads easily in a world where

[455] Fritze, R. H. (2009) Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-Religions. London: Reaktion Books.

misinformation travels faster than ever before. The only real defence is education—learning how to think critically, evaluate sources, and understand what makes history dependable. Without that, people remain vulnerable to falsehoods disguised as truth. Fritze's work is a call to resist these distortions and protect the integrity of historical knowledge in a world increasingly shaped by fantasy and deception.

The problem with science

Science is facing a serious credibility problem. Across fields as varied as psychology, medicine, and economics, researchers are finding that many published studies cannot be replicated. This growing concern is known as the reproducibility crisis. At its core, it challenges the very idea of what reliable science should be. In 'The Reproducibility Crisis and What to Do About It[456]', R. Barker Bausell outlines how we arrived at this moment and what steps might be taken to correct course. Reproducibility means that the same results can be obtained when an experiment is repeated under the same conditions. It is a basic test of whether a study's findings can be trusted. But increasingly, many studies fail that test. Sometimes it is due to weak experimental designs, misuse of statistics, or a simple lack of transparency in how data was collected and analysed. Often, the problem is deeper: a culture that rewards researchers for getting 'interesting' results rather than truthful ones. The pressure to publish, especially in high-impact journals, has created strong incentives for scientists to produce positive results. This is known as publication bias. Studies that find no effect, or that contradict previous findings, are far less likely to be published. As a result, the literature becomes skewed toward success stories—many of which later turn out to be false positives. Bausell notes that this crisis is not caused by bad intentions alone. It is also driven by systemic factors. Researchers chase funding, tenure, and reputation. Journals chase citations. Everyone is caught in a cycle that encourages quantity over quality. The result is a scientific landscape filled with papers that look solid on the surface but do not hold up when evaluated again. The book also revisits the ideas of Donald T. Campbell and Julian C. Stanley, who defined internal and external validity. Internal validity asks whether the results are caused by the tested variables. External validity asks whether those results apply more broadly. While researchers have focused heavily on internal validity—often through statistical tools and randomised trials—external validity has been neglected. Replication is essential to judge whether results are generalizable, and yet it remains rare. Bausell argues that change must come from both cultural and institutional reforms. Researchers need better training in statistics and study design. Journals should commit to publishing well-executed studies regardless of the outcome. Pre-registration of studies, where researchers commit to a plan before data collection, is one promising step. Open data sharing is another. These practices help prevent selective reporting and improve transparency. Most of all, science needs to reclaim its humility. Not every experiment will produce a breakthrough. Negative results are not failures—they are part of the process. The path to better science starts by accepting that truth matters more than novelty, and that reproducibility is not a technical detail but a foundation.

Deception for profit

Daniel S. Greenberg's 'Science, Money, and Politics: Political Triumph and Ethical Erosion[457]' (2001) traces how American science rose to prominence through political support

[456] Bausell, R. B. (2021) The Reproducibility Crisis and What to Do About It. Oxford University Press.
[457] Greenberg, D. S. (2001) Science, Money, and Politics: Political Triumph and Ethical Erosion. University of Chicago Press.

and financial investment, but not without ethical costs. The book spans the post-World War II era to the early 21st century, showing how science, once relatively autonomous and idealised, gradually became enmeshed in political agendas and economic pressures. What began as a system of public funding for public good evolved into a sprawling enterprise that now depends heavily on lobbying, corporate partnerships, and government favour. Greenberg argues that science's expansion has brought prosperity but also created a bureaucracy more concerned with growth than integrity. Scientists, universities, and research institutions now devote significant energy to securing funding, sometimes at the expense of ethical standards. The political rhetoric used to justify funding often inflates the promise of scientific breakthroughs, shaping public expectations and diverting attention from deeper issues of transparency and accountability. As corporate investment in science grows, the boundary between independent research and private interest becomes harder to define. Scientific autonomy—once taken for granted—is now a claim that must be defended. While researchers argue that free inquiry produces better results, Greenberg shows how the structure of modern funding has shifted priorities. Industry's influence over university research and the metrics used to evaluate scientific success increasingly reflect financial rather than intellectual goals. Despite the concerns raised, scientists remain politically cautious. Most stay within their academic circles, reluctant to engage directly with the political process. This self-imposed isolation limits their influence on policy decisions that deeply affect the direction of research. As science grew more powerful, it also became more vulnerable to the same political and market forces that shaped other sectors of public life. Greenberg challenges the myth that science has been neglected or defunded. In fact, funding has remained steady or even increased, especially when scientists successfully lobby by aligning their work with national interests. The fear of budget cuts, while useful as a rallying cry, often masks the real problem: the ethical erosion that comes from courting political and corporate patrons. When funding depends on pleasing external stakeholders, scientific judgment can be compromised. The book concludes by urging a closer look at how political myths and financial dependencies influence science. The system, though successful in many ways, risks prioritising growth over integrity. Ethical questions are too often sidelined in favour of productivity and influence. Science today stands as a powerful institution, one capable of shaping national policy and technological innovation. But that power comes with responsibility.

In 2001 Greenberg calls for more transparency, a broader ethical conversation, and a renewed focus on public interest over profit. But the chances of that happening are slim, given current trends in scientific publishing and the growing body of research exposing 'organized scientific fraud' and misconduct within science itself. In 2005 Reese A. K. Richardson and Luís A. Nunes Amaral are literally 'fighting for science' in their call for a multi-pronged strategy to protect legitimate scientific publishing: tighter oversight of editorial processes, better tools for detecting fabricated research, deeper insight into the networks enabling misconduct, and a fundamental overhaul of science's incentive structures. Their concerns align with the study[458] 'The entities enabling scientific fraud at scale are large, resilient, and growing rapidly', which shows how paper mills, brokers, and predatory journals have become deeply embedded in the research ecosystem. They stress that reforms are urgent, especially before artificial intelligence further infiltrates the scientific record. "If we're not prepared to deal with the fraud that's

[458] Richardson, R.A.K., Hong, S.S., Byrne, J.A., Stoeger, T. and Amaral, L.A.N. (2025). The entities enabling scientific fraud at scale are large, resilient, and growing rapidly. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 122(32). doi:https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2420092122.

already occurring, then we're certainly not prepared to deal with what generative AI can do to scientific literature," Richardson warns. Without action, the boundaries of what counts as scientific fact may blur beyond recognition, feeding AI models that will generate even more questionable work in the future. If organised fraud robs scientists of trust in their own community, the personal and emotional damage may prove the greatest threat to the future of science itself.

"This study is probably the most depressing project I've been involved with in my entire life. Since I was a kid, I was excited about science. It's distressing to see others engage in fraud and in misleading others. But if you believe that science is useful and important for humanity, then you have to fight for it." - Luís A. Nunes Amaral[459]

Honesty under siege

Todd Wilkinson's 'Science Under Siege: The Politicians' War on Nature and Truth[460]' tells the story of scientists working for America's public lands, caught in a growing struggle between ecological truth and political power. These scientists, whose job is to study and protect ecosystems, are increasingly pressured to adjust or suppress their findings to suit political and economic agendas. Their work has become more difficult, not because of nature itself, but because of the political climate that disregards or even attacks science when it stands in the way of profit or ideology. During the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Wilkinson documents how politicians, industry lobbyists, and anti-government activists challenged the role of federal land agencies and those who worked within them. Scientists responsible for monitoring rangelands, forests, and wildlife found themselves sidelined or retaliated against when their findings conflicted with development interests. Even decisions about cattle grazing or timber cutting, once based on ecological data, became political battles. These confrontations discouraged honest research and discouraged the use of sound science in policymaking. Wilkinson highlights the moral struggle of many public servants who remain committed to facts despite the risks. These are not scientists in ivory towers, but people who live in small towns, work in field stations, and often face hostility from neighbours aligned with powerful commercial interests. Their dedication to ecological truth, despite the threats, underscores a broader cultural tension: science as a form of civic duty is being challenged by a political landscape increasingly shaped by misinformation, industry pressure, and populist suspicion. The book also explores how political leaders have used misinformation campaigns to erode trust in public institutions, casting scientists as elitist or untrustworthy. This tactic, Wilkinson argues, undermines both public confidence and environmental protection. As anti-regulatory sentiment grows, scientists are frequently portrayed not as protectors of public resources but as obstacles to economic freedom. This reframing has had real consequences, including threats to personal safety and long-term damage to public lands. Moreover, Wilkinson shows how the media and the public have often been slow to defend these scientists. Scientific complexity does not translate easily into headlines, and in rural communities especially, the narrative of government overreach often wins out over ecological nuance. As a result, the silencing of science becomes normalised, and the long-term health of ecosystems becomes an afterthought. At its core, 'Science Under Siege'

[459] Northwestern University (2025). Organized scientific fraud is growing at an alarming rate, study uncovers. [online] Phys.org. Available at: https://phys.org/news/2025-08-scientific-fraud-alarming-uncovers.html [Accessed 10 Aug. 2025].

[460] Wilkinson, T. (2004) Science Under Siege: The Politicians' War on Nature and Truth. Johnson Books.

is a call to recognise the essential role of science in shaping responsible environmental policy. It warns that if society allows politics to distort facts, the cost will be paid in damaged landscapes, diminished biodiversity, and weakened democratic institutions. Truth is not just a scientific value but a public one.

3.2. Science fraud

(Broken methods, broken trust: The systemic crisis of scientific fraud)

'Let us forget for a moment that some of these false tales produced positive effects… What represents a problem is rather the way they managed to replace other tales that today we consider true'.

— Umberto Eco, Serendipities: Language and Lunacy

'The pressure to publish has become the pressure to fabricate'.

— Stuart Ritchie, Science Fictions

Scientific deception

Science is often imagined as a pure, objective search for truth, guided by integrity and free from personal motives. This belief has granted scientists a level of public trust and reverence that few other professions enjoy. Yet behind this ideal lies a more complicated reality. In 'Scientific Deception: An Overview and Guide to the Literature of Misconduct and Fraud in Scientific Research[461]' Lesley Grayson explains, scientific research is not immune to the flaws and pressures that affect other domains of human behaviour. Misconduct and deception are real and increasingly visible problems that challenge the credibility of science itself. Grayson highlights how public faith in science has begun to erode, especially as conflicting claims emerge even within the same field. Opposing studies on similar topics often reach contradictory conclusions. This inconsistency can leave people confused and sceptical. The problem is not always a matter of deliberate fraud. More often, subtle pressures—such as funding expectations, career advancement, or ideological commitments—shape how data is collected, interpreted, and reported. Scientists, like anyone else, are influenced by their environments. The word 'deception' in this context does not refer only to criminal behaviour. It includes a range of ethical lapses, from outright fabrication to biased study designs and selective data reporting. The pressure to publish in prestigious journals and to secure grants fuels this environment. Researchers may feel compelled to present their findings in ways that emphasise novelty or significance, even when the data are weak or inconclusive. Sponsors and commercial interests may also influence outcomes, particularly in fields like pharmaceutical research, where billions are at stake. Grayson also draws attention to the weaknesses in the systems that are supposed to detect and correct these problems. Peer review, while central to scientific publishing, can be conservative, inconsistent, or biased. Replication of results—another key pillar of scientific credibility—is rarely attempted, especially in high-cost or high-stakes research. This means that flawed or fraudulent studies can persist unchallenged for years. Much of the current discussion around scientific integrity focuses on rare and egregious cases of fraud. While these are certainly damaging, they may distract from more systemic issues. Widespread but less visible

[461] Grayson, L. (1981) Scientific Deception: An Overview and Guide to the Literature of Misconduct and Fraud in Scientific Research. British Library.

biases, often driven by structural and institutional pressures, can distort the scientific record far more than isolated incidents of misconduct. The challenge is not just to catch bad actors, but to reshape the research environment in ways that discourage subtle forms of dishonesty and encourage openness. Grayson argues for a more honest recognition of the human factors in science. Transparency about funding sources, institutional affiliations, and potential conflicts of interest should become standard practice. Efforts to include diverse perspectives, particularly those that challenge dominant assumptions, may also strengthen scientific objectivity. Scientific deception—whether intentional or not—undermines the credibility of science and weakens public trust. The solution lies not only in stricter regulation, but in cultural and institutional change that prioritises integrity over productivity.

Necessity to publish negative results

In 'The Science Reproducibility Crisis and the Necessity to Publish Negative Results[462]', José González Martín-Moro examines the growing concerns surrounding reproducibility in scientific research and highlights how this undermines the credibility of scientific findings when studies cannot be reliably replicated. The broader publication of negative results as a critical step towards enhancing transparency, reducing publication bias, and fortifying the integrity of the scientific enterprise. Scientific research depends on the ability to replicate results. Yet, many researchers find that this is increasingly difficult. Survey showed that more than 70 percent of scientists had failed to reproduce another researcher's experiment. Even more troubling, 60 percent were unable to replicate their own findings. The problem is most acute in medicine and biology, where variables are complex and small changes can produce vastly different outcomes. But beyond technical reasons, a deeper issue drives the crisis—publication bias. Positive results dominate scientific journals. Around 90 percent of published studies report successful outcomes. This raises a simple question: are researchers unusually accurate, or are negative results simply going unpublished? The trend is not new. In 1959, Sterling found that all published articles in leading journals reported positive findings. Over time, this bias has only worsened. Editors prefer success stories, and researchers often shelve studies that fall short of statistical significance. If a result does not cross the p-value threshold, it may be considered uninteresting, and the work ends up in a drawer, unseen and unused. This habit distorts the scientific record. When only positive outcomes are visible, the community gets a false sense of certainty. Failed experiments and inconclusive data vanish, even though they are just as informative. The result is a skewed understanding of scientific progress and a heightened risk of false positives. Especially in areas like drug development, where early studies often show promise, the lack of negative follow-up studies creates unrealistic expectations. High-impact journals prioritise novelty, not reliability. Publishing mistakes and failures might seem unappealing, but it is essential. Dead ends reveal as much about reality as breakthroughs do. When a method fails, it teaches other researchers what not to try. If these lessons remain hidden, others may repeat the same fruitless paths, wasting time and resources. Moreover, sharing negative findings helps refine future research. It narrows the field and leads scientists toward more promising approaches. There is also an ethical dimension. The current academic culture rewards quantity over substance. Researchers are pushed to produce results that will get published, often at the expense of honesty. This pressure encourages selective reporting and even questionable research practices. Publishing all results, whether they succeed or not, shifts the focus from prestige to truth. It builds a healthier, more transparent environment where the

[462] González Martín-Moro, J. (2020) The Science Reproducibility Crisis and the Necessity to Publish Negative Results. Research Ethics, 16(2), pp. 1–5.

value of knowledge outweighs the urge to impress. The reproducibility crisis is not only about flawed experiments. It reflects a systemic issue with how science is communicated. To move forward, the scientific community must embrace all results. Publishing negative findings will not bring instant acclaim, but it will support long-term progress. Mistakes, false starts, and failed hypotheses are not embarrassing—they are part of the process.

Reproducibility in the age of digital medicine

In 'The Reproducibility Crisis in the Age of Digital Medicine[463]', Stupple, Singerman, and Celi explore the challenges of ensuring reliable and replicable findings amid the rapid integration of digital technologies in healthcare. They highlight how issues such as data heterogeneity, inadequate reporting standards, and overfitting in machine learning models threaten the validity of digital medicine, calling for stronger methodological rigor and transparency to uphold clinical trust and patient safety. Digital medicine has expanded rapidly, driven by advances in computing, access to large datasets, and the rise of machine learning. These tools are transforming healthcare, from predicting patient outcomes to interpreting medical images. The field holds great promise. But with this promise comes a pressing concern: can these findings be trusted? The reproducibility crisis that has troubled other areas of science may be approaching digital medicine as well. Reproducibility means that independent researchers can repeat an experiment and arrive at the same results. It is a cornerstone of scientific reliability. But many studies, especially in psychology and biomedicine, have failed to meet this standard. A 2015 project by the Centre for Open Science could only replicate 39 of 100 psychology studies. In 2016, a 'Nature' survey revealed that reproducibility problems extended to multiple scientific fields. Biomedicine showed the most concern, and for good reason—clinical decisions rely on solid evidence. The factors behind the crisis are well known. Flawed statistics, selective reporting, and pressure to publish positive results all contribute. In the rush to make headlines or secure funding, researchers may sacrifice rigor. Peer review often fails to catch these problems. Digital medicine, with its emphasis on novel algorithms and data analysis, risks repeating these same mistakes unless it changes course. There is also a deeper issue: the tension between innovation and reliability. Science thrives on bold ideas, but those ideas must be assessed and confirmed. In the 17th century, Robert Boyle and the Royal Society pushed for reproducibility through what Boyle called 'virtual witnessing'. Scientists were encouraged to follow detailed methods so others could repeat the results. But even then, written accounts proved insufficient. Replication required more than just access to the text—it needed careful observation and shared standards. In digital medicine today, the same problem persists, though in a new form. A paper may describe an algorithm, but without access to the data, code, and parameters, replication is difficult. Minor changes in data processing can lead to vastly different results. Moreover, many machine learning models are treated as black boxes, offering impressive outputs without clear explanations. This opacity undermines trust. To avoid a full-blown crisis, digital medicine must embrace rigorous and transparent practices. This means sharing data and code, using better statistical methods, and improving peer review to prioritise replication. The field should also value studies that confirm or refute earlier results, not just those that claim to break new ground. The stakes are high. Digital medicine touches on real lives and healthcare decisions. If its findings cannot be replicated, trust in the field will erode. As history shows, science progresses not only through discovery but through careful

[463] Stupple, A., Singerman, D., and Celi, L. A. (2019) The Reproducibility Crisis in the Age of Digital Medicine. npj Digital Medicine, 2(2).

verification. Digital medicine must learn from past mistakes and build a culture that values both innovation and reliability.

A statistical counterattack

In 'The Reproducibility Crisis in Science: A Statistical Counterattack[464]', Roger D. Peng addresses the growing concern over irreproducible scientific results by advocating for stronger statistical practices and greater data transparency. He argues that reproducibility is not a luxury but a fundamental component of scientific integrity and proposes reproducible research as a practical remedy to restore trust in scientific findings. In the last two decades, the ability to collect data has expanded rapidly. Thanks to cheaper sensors, digital devices, and growing computational power, people are generating vast amounts of data every day. Health, economics, biology—every field now benefits from massive datasets. But while collecting data has become easier, making sense of it has not. The gap between data collection and proper analysis is growing. This has fuelled a crisis in scientific reproducibility. Replication—when independent researchers reproduce the results of a study using their own data and methods—has always been a standard of good science. Reproducibility, in a computational sense, means rerunning the original analysis with the same data and code to get the same results. Both are crucial to verifying scientific claims. Yet too often, studies either fail to replicate or produce misleading results, even when they can technically be reproduced. Several well-known examples show how this plays out. In 2006, a research group at Duke University claimed to have created a genomic tool to predict cancer patients' responses to chemotherapy. When statisticians from MD Anderson Cancer Centre tried to validate the findings, they found serious flaws in the analysis, including mislabelled data and computational errors. In economics, a 2010 paper by Reinhart and Rogoff argued that high levels of government debt hurt economic growth. Their study was influential in shaping global austerity policies. But a graduate student discovered that they had made spreadsheet errors and excluded relevant data. Their conclusions collapsed under scrutiny. In both cases, the studies were technically reproducible. Anyone could re-run the code and get the same results. The problem was that the analyses were flawed from the start. The issue was not about sharing data—it was about how that data was used. These examples show that reproducibility alone is not enough. Good science also requires good statistical practice. Roger Peng argues that the real solution lies in education. The current system of peer review often fails to catch poor analysis. Reviewers typically do not have time—or sometimes the expertise—to recheck statistical methods in detail. Instead of relying on fixes after publication, the focus should shift to prevention. Scientists must be trained in data analysis, not just data collection. Peng emphasises the need for reproducible tools, sound software, and a clear understanding of statistical principles. To meet this need, Peng and colleagues at Johns Hopkins developed the Data Science Specialisation, a series of courses aimed at teaching scientists and students how to work with data properly. But education at scale is just one part of the solution. Science also needs better standards, open tools, and a culture that values careful analysis over flashy results. The reproducibility crisis is not just about bad luck or isolated mistakes. It reflects a systemic failure to match scientific ambition with statistical discipline. Better training in data science can help prevent errors before they happen—and restore confidence in research.

[464] Peng, R. D. (2015) The Reproducibility Crisis in Science: A Statistical Counterattack. Significance, 12(3), pp. 30–32.

Publication bias

Publication bias continues to distort the scientific record by favouring positive results over null or negative ones. This imbalance not only misrepresents the state of scientific knowledge but also undermines credibility. Several strategies have emerged to counteract this problem and promote more transparent, inclusive research practices, as discussed in 'The Reproducibility Crisis and What to Do About It[465]' by R. Barker Bausell. One of the most direct responses is the active submission of negative results. Researchers are encouraged not to give up after a single rejection, since the current publishing landscape includes a wide range of journals—many of which are open to studies that challenge prevailing assumptions. Equally important is how these results are framed. Authors should clearly explain why the absence of an effect matters, and what it contributes to the field. Transparency about methodological issues is also valued during peer review, reinforcing the idea that rigor outweighs novelty. Presenting negative findings at academic conferences is another powerful tool. These venues allow researchers to communicate their results informally, even if formal publication is delayed. In cases where travel is restricted, collaborators or colleagues can step in to share the work, ensuring it still reaches the academic community. Serving as peer reviewers or journal editors can also make a difference. Researchers in these roles are urged to assess studies based on the soundness of their design and analysis, rather than whether the results are statistically significant. Shifting the focus to methodology helps decentre the publication obsession with striking conclusions. Preprint archives, such as arXiv and bioRxiv, have become valuable platforms for bypassing editorial bias. These repositories allow studies to be disseminated without traditional peer review, offering a space where negative or inconclusive findings can be shared openly. They also allow for detailed documentation since word limits are less of an issue. Among the most promising developments is the model of Registered Reports. Introduced by Chris Chambers and others, this approach restructures the review process by evaluating studies before data is collected. At stage one, researchers submit their hypothesis and methods for peer review. If approved, the journal agrees to publish the study regardless of the outcome, provided the methodology is followed. This reduces questionable research practices and reorients the publishing system toward quality rather than results. Negative results often have greater long-term validity. For instance, a study on clinical trials for liver diseases found that negative conclusions were more likely to remain valid over time than positive ones. This suggests that what seems less exciting may be more accurate. Finally, education and mentorship are crucial. Future scientists need training not just in technical skills, but in responsible research practices. This includes understanding replication, statistical power, and the ethical importance of publishing all results. Projects like CREP encourage undergraduates to engage in replication, instilling values of transparency early on. These strategies point toward a more balanced and honest scientific culture—one where results are valued for their contribution, not just their novelty.

Language of health care deception

In 'Sickening: How Big Pharma Broke American Health Care and How We Can Repair It[466]', John Abramson exposes the systemic deception strategies used by pharmaceutical companies to distort scientific evidence, mislead doctors, and prioritise profit over patient well-being. He reveals how manipulated clinical trials, hidden data, and aggressive marketing have

[465] Bausell, R. B. (2021) The Reproducibility Crisis and What to Do About It. Oxford University Press.
[466] Abramson, J. (2022) Sickening: How Big Pharma Broke American Health Care and How We Can Repair It. Mariner Books.

corrupted medical knowledge and undermined public trust in healthcare. The American health care system, despite its technological advances, delivers some of the worst outcomes among wealthy nations. With one in five dollars of GDP spent on health, the United States continues to fall behind in life expectancy, chronic disease management, and health equity. According to John Abramson, this is not a failure of medicine itself, but of the system designed around it—particularly the influence of pharmaceutical companies that shape what treatments get researched, promoted, and prescribed. Over the past forty years, drug companies have taken control of the clinical research agenda. As public funding shrank, private corporations filled the gap, directing research not toward better health outcomes but toward products that maximise shareholder returns. These companies now oversee every part of the research pipeline: the design of studies, the analysis of data, and the publication of findings. Much of the medical information doctors rely on is filtered through this lens, leaving them unaware of how biased that information may be. While some drugs offer real breakthroughs, many offer only marginal benefits, often at inflated prices. These high costs disproportionately affect American patients, since the U.S. is the primary market driving global pharmaceutical profits. Marketing campaigns push expensive medications while downplaying affordable alternatives. Worse, the system encourages overprescription—evident in the opioid epidemic, where companies knowingly minimised the risks of addiction to boost sales. The pandemic exposed this imbalance further. Although much of the vaccine research was publicly funded, private firms claimed the credit and set prices as they saw fit. The government failed to negotiate lower costs or ensure global distribution, instead allowing companies to profit from public desperation. These decisions reflected a system in which profit, not public health, takes precedence. Abramson's legal and medical work highlights how corporations often conceal or distort negative trial results. In lawsuits involving drugs like Vioxx and Bextra, he uncovered internal documents showing how companies misled both regulators and the public. Yet even when companies are found guilty of wrongdoing, fines are absorbed as business expenses, and key executives rarely face accountability. The structural problems run deep. Academic medical centres, journals, and even federal regulators are often financially entangled with the same industry they are meant to oversee. The approval of ineffective drugs like Aduhelm, despite internal objections, illustrates how commercial pressure overrides medical judgment. The result is a system bloated by waste, riddled with inequality, and unable to deliver consistent or affordable care. Fixing this will not be easy. It demands a shift in political will and public perception. Reform must break the cycle of influence and return medical research to public service. That means greater transparency, independent oversight, and funding structures that prioritise health, not returns. The illusion of American medical superiority has allowed this system to persist. This illusion has been sustained not by facts, but by a carefully constructed language—buzzwords like 'innovation', slogans like 'breakthrough therapy', and PR narratives that mask corporate interests as scientific progress. By controlling the discourse, Big Pharma has sold mistrust as care, and profit as health, turning language itself into the most potent drug of all.

Doctoring data

In 'Impure Science: Fraud, Compromise, and Political Influence in Scientific Research[467]' (1992), Robert Bell investigates how scientific integrity is often compromised by institutional pressures, financial incentives, and political agendas. He reveals how the manipulation of

[467] Bell, R. (1992) Impure Science: Fraud, Compromise, and Political Influence in Scientific Research. Berkeley: University of California Press.

research—what might be euphemistically called 'doctoring data'—is not merely a breach of ethics, but a systemic feature of how science operates under corporate and state influence. The case of Stephen Breuning stands as a disturbing example of scientific fraud and the institutional failures that allowed it to persist. Breuning, a former researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, admitted in 1988 to fabricating data in studies funded by federal grants. His work focused on drug treatments for mentally disabled children and recommended the use of stimulants, despite evidence that such medications worsened behaviour. His false findings directly influenced treatment protocols and public policy. Breuning's fraud came to light thanks to his mentor, Dr. Robert Sprague, who noticed inconsistencies in the research. Sprague investigated on his own and discovered that some studies, like one conducted at Coldwater Regional Centre, were completely fictitious. Breuning had not even been at the site when he claimed to have collected the data. More red flags emerged, such as reported 100 per cent agreement between nurses observing behavioural changes in children—statistically implausible. Sprague brought his concerns to the National Institute of Mental Health in 1983, calling not only for scrutiny of the Coldwater study but for a comprehensive review of Breuning's entire body of work. Initially, the University of Pittsburgh conducted a narrow internal inquiry and did not extend the investigation to his broader research. Even after Breuning confessed to falsifying data, the university closed the case. It was not until the media reported the scandal that the National Institute of Mental Health convened an external panel, which eventually concluded that all Breuning's work was fabricated. Despite doing the right thing, Sprague paid a steep price for exposing the fraud. The university sought to discredit him, accusing him of making false statements. NIMH slashed his funding, which Sprague believed was retaliation for his whistleblowing. He received little support from the scientific community—only one of Breuning's 30 coauthors publicly defended him. This lack of solidarity underscored the reluctance of researchers to speak out against misconduct, even in clear cases. Breuning's fraudulent research caused harm not only to science but also to vulnerable patients. It influenced treatment guidelines and diverted resources from legitimate studies. Yet the institutions involved failed to act swiftly or thoroughly. Instead of enforcing scientific standards, they protected reputations and funding pipelines. The lesson here is that misconduct often goes unpunished while truth-tellers face isolation and reprisal. This episode reveals the structural weaknesses in how scientific fraud is investigated and how whistleblowers are treated. Institutional self-interest, bureaucratic inertia, and fear of controversy too often outweigh the pursuit of truth. The Breuning case, documented in Robert Bell's 'Impure Science', serves as a warning: without transparency and accountability, science risks losing the very credibility it relies upon. Such linguistic strategies mask deception as innovation, turning scientific fraud into a calculated business opportunity rather than an aberration. Instead of fighting illness, institutions often construct a facade of progress, where manipulated results serve branding, investment, and influence more than truth or health.

Science for hire

The tobacco industry's strategy to challenge the health risks of second-hand smoke was neither scientific nor impartial. It was a deliberate effort to manipulate public understanding and stall government regulation. In their article 'Science for Hire: A Tobacco Industry Strategy to Influence Public Opinion on Secondhand Smoke[468]', Monique E. Muggli, Richard D. Hurt, and D. Douglas Blanke uncover how tobacco companies orchestrated a global campaign to

[468] Muggli, M. E., Hurt, R. D., and Blanke, D. D. (2003) 'Science for Hire: A Tobacco Industry Strategy to Influence Public Opinion on Secondhand Smoke', Tobacco Control, 12(1), pp. 140–146.

distort the science of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), disguising industry interests under a layer of scientific credibility. Central to this campaign was the ETS Consultants Program, a carefully constructed network of scientists who would serve as credible messengers to question the dangers of second-hand smoke. The program was not driven by researchers or public health experts but by lawyers working for the tobacco industry. These attorneys designed and managed the operation to ensure that all public-facing scientific activity aligned with corporate goals. By placing lawyers between the consultants and the companies, they could shield tobacco firms from direct association while guiding the message. The industry recruited scientists not only from the United States but also from Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Selection was based on scientific credentials, political influence, and willingness to align with industry narratives. These consultants were paid to attend conferences, publish studies, and submit letters to newspapers, all aimed at promoting doubt about the harms of second-hand smoke. Many acted as expert witnesses in legal or regulatory settings, using their status to challenge restrictions on indoor smoking. Tobacco companies went further by creating front organisations, like Indoor Air International, which functioned as seemingly independent voices promoting industry-friendly views on air quality. These groups gave legitimacy to claims that second-hand smoke was not a major health concern, a message that contradicted the growing scientific consensus. At the same time, the consultants helped flood the media with op-eds, interviews, and studies that challenged the World Health Organisation and national health agencies. What made this campaign so effective was its appearance of scientific neutrality. By hiring academics and professionals, the tobacco industry gave the impression that there was legitimate debate within the scientific community. The debate was manufactured. The goal was never to uncover the truth but to delay regulation, confuse policymakers, and maintain the profitability of tobacco products. The ETS Consultants Program cost millions, but it paid off by postponing smoking bans and weakening public health campaigns. It exposed how science can be used not to clarify but to confuse, especially when manipulated by corporate interests. The program was not just about protecting profits; it was about controlling the conversation around health and responsibility.

Pay-to-Publish science

In 'The 'Pay-to-Publish' Model Should Be Abolished[469]'(2021), Raghavendra Gadagkar critiques the growing dominance of publication systems that require researchers to pay for their work to appear in journals. He argues that this model creates perverse incentives, privileging visibility over validity and distorting the scientific process in favour of those with funding rather than those with insight. Gadagkar argues that the current model of scholarly publishing, where authors pay to have their work published and readers access it for free, is fundamentally flawed. This so-called open access system has been presented as a progressive solution to the problem of expensive academic journals. But it shifts the financial burden from readers to authors and continues to enrich commercial publishers at the cost of equity and quality in research. Initially, research funders—both public and private—were frustrated by having to pay twice: first to support the research, and then again to access the results locked behind expensive journal subscriptions. Open access was meant to fix this by making published work freely available. Yet, under the pay-to-publish model, funders still pay twice—now funding both the research and its publication. The profits, again, go to commercial publishers. This model worsens existing inequalities in the academic world. Scholars from well-funded institutions can afford

[469] Gadagkar, R. (2021) 'The "Pay-to-Publish" Model Should Be Abolished', Current Science, 121(11), pp. 1383–1384.

high publication fees. But for researchers in poorer regions or underfunded institutions, these fees can be prohibitive. The result is a growing divide between those who can afford to publish and those who cannot. Open access, in this form, becomes a mechanism for reinforcing academic hierarchies rather than breaking them down. The rise of predatory journals only deepens the crisis. These outlets, often little more than publishing scams, charge authors fees and accept any submission, regardless of quality. In 2014 alone, more than 420,000 articles were published in such journals, generating millions in revenue. The problem lies not just in individual bad actors but in the structure of the pay-to-publish model itself, which creates incentives for quantity over quality. Gadagkar suggests an alternative: a model where a portion of research funding is set aside to support journals that are free to publish in and free to read. These could be run by academic societies or other nonprofit organisations. Unlike commercial publishers, these groups have no interest in exploiting the system for profit. Their goal would be to maintain quality and provide genuine access to knowledge. Such a shift would require social and legal support. Institutions and researchers would need to recognise and reward publication in non-commercial journals. Legal frameworks could also help diminish the legitimacy of profit-driven publishing models. Over time, paid journals could lose their influence as credibility shifts toward open and ethical platforms. Gadagkar's proposal is not only practical but ethical. The pay-to-publish system compromises academic integrity and excludes those without financial resources. A fairer model is possible—one that protects the values of scholarship and ensures that research serves everyone, not just those who can afford to participate. By turning knowledge into a transactional product, this system encourages the linguistic inflation of results—where language is tailored not to illuminate, but to impress reviewers and attract citations. What emerges is not clarity or truth, but a performance of legitimacy, where the polished appearance of science masks deeper distortions.

3.3. Overproduction of truth

(Truth inflation: When scientific knowledge becomes noise)

'Too many facts crowd out the truth'.

— Paul Valéry, Tel quel (1941)

Overproduction of truth

In 'The Overproduction of Truth: Passion, Competition, and Integrity in Modern Science[470]', Gianfranco Pacchioni offers a stark reflection on how scientific culture has shifted under the weight of its own expansion. What began as a calling for a few driven individuals has turned into a global profession defined by metrics, pressure, and constant output. With over ten million researchers working today and tens of millions projected in the coming decades, science is growing—but not always in the right direction. Pacchioni traces this transformation through the lens of history and personal experience. Once, science unfolded slowly. Communication took time, and breakthroughs were rare but significant. Scientists like Newton and Leibniz debated ideas through letters, respectful and deliberate. Even into the 20th century, figures like Fermi and Pasteur worked in environments that allowed space for thought and ethical rigor. Today, however, the pace is unrelenting. The Internet, once seen as a tool for greater access and

[470] Pacchioni, G. (2021) The Overproduction of Truth: Passion, Competition, and Integrity in Modern Science. Springer.

collaboration, has become a double-edged sword. It accelerates the spread of information but also encourages superficiality, hastiness, and an obsession with being first. This shift has changed what it means to be a scientist. Pacchioni notes how young researchers now face intense competition and expectations to produce constantly. Success is often measured by the number of publications, not the depth of insight. In such a climate, ethical considerations are at risk. Integrity, once central to the practice of science, now competes with the lure of recognition and speed. He recounts the case of a PhD candidate whose degree was suspended due to plagiarism. The incident shocked everyone involved, but it also exposed a deeper truth. The pressure to publish had pushed the student to cut corners, echoing a broader trend. In many institutions, such behaviour is quietly tolerated or overlooked, especially when it leads to results. Years later, the student went on to become a professor—proof that even serious ethical breaches might be forgotten if academic success follows. Pacchioni does not stop at anecdotes. He discusses how plagiarism detection software has become a necessary tool, revealing widespread copying not only of text but also of images and data. Yet even these tools have limits. Ideas can be reworded and repackaged without raising alarms. In rapidly expanding scientific communities, where oversight is limited and publication is rewarded primarily, the temptation to plagiarise becomes harder to resist. What emerges is not just a story about dishonesty, but about a deeper erosion of values. Science is producing more than ever, but it is also risking the loss of what makes it trustworthy. Pacchioni sees this as a crisis—not of science's capacity, but of its purpose and direction. Quantity has outpaced quality, and the race to produce has replaced the desire to understand. Unless the scientific community reclaims its commitment to ethics and reflection, the overproduction of truth may lead to its collapse. The warning is clear: integrity must matter more than output, or science will lose the trust it depends on.

Where does science go?

Gianfranco Pacchioni, in 'The Overproduction of Truth', confronts a troubling reality: science is growing too fast for its own good. In the early 20th century, there were around 180,000 active researchers. By 1990, that number had passed 300,000. Today, it exceeds ten million. Alongside this growth, more than two million scientific papers are published each year. While these numbers suggest incredible progress, they also raise serious questions about quality, ethics, and sustainability. Pacchioni argues that science, once defined by depth, has shifted toward volume. The intimate, idea-driven exchanges of earlier generations have been replaced by massive conferences where thousands present fleeting summaries of their work. Instead of extended debate and deep collaboration, poster sessions and networking events dominate. The scientific community has become too large, too fast, and the race to publish has outpaced the time needed for thoughtful inquiry. This pressure to produce has consequences. Young scientists are caught in a system where securing permanent academic positions feels increasingly out of reach. Postdoctoral researchers often move from one temporary contract to another, chasing prestige and funding. The dream of a stable academic life has faded into a reality of constant competition, and with it comes burnout, disillusionment, and ethical compromise. The expansion of PhD programs has played a central role. Institutions produce more doctoral graduates than they can absorb, leading to an oversupply of highly trained individuals with few clear career paths. As competition intensifies, the incentive to cut corners grows. Data manipulation, plagiarism, and rushed results are no longer isolated cases. They are symptoms of a system that rewards speed and quantity over care and truth. Pacchioni describes this not simply as a moral failing but as a structural flaw. The model of scientific productivity has become unsustainable. Some have proposed radical solutions, such as limiting the number

of papers a scientist can publish in their lifetime or allocating 'publication tokens' to encourage selectivity and thoughtfulness. While these ideas may seem extreme, they signal a growing awareness that science needs to slow down. Public trust is also at stake. In a world flooded with contradictory studies and sensational claims, people struggle to distinguish between credible research and misinformation. When scientists themselves are caught up in scandals, public confidence declines further. If science is to maintain its authority in guiding decisions on climate, health, and technology, it must reaffirm its commitment to transparency, accuracy, and ethics. The crisis, as Pacchioni presents it, is not hopeless—but it is urgent. Scientists must reclaim their role not only as discoverers but as stewards of knowledge. This means resisting the pressure to publish endlessly, insisting on quality over volume, and mentoring the next generation with integrity. It also means engaging society in an honest dialogue about what science is, what it can truly offer, and what it risks becoming. Science today is oversupplying data at an unprecedented rate, generating a torrent of findings, models, and conclusions that exceed the public's—and often scientists'—capacity to absorb or interpret them. The scientific image of the world has become so intricate, layered, and fragmented that it no longer clarifies reality but overwhelms it. This excess risks turning science from a tool of understanding into a machine of complexity, where knowledge becomes inaccessible and authority replaces meaning. Such a structure mirrors the model of religious knowledge under theocratic rule, where guarded truths and hierarchical control dictated what could be known and who was permitted to know it.

Oversupply of facts

In the information economy, facts have become the new commodities. Just as overproduction in classical economics describes the excessive output of goods beyond consumer demand, today's world suffers from an oversupply of facts, words, ideas, slogans, books, articles, and scientific studies—far beyond the capacity of society to meaningfully absorb, interpret, or act upon them. This glut of information does not lead to enlightenment but to confusion, disorientation, and, paradoxically, ignorance. As with material goods in capitalism, the production of knowledge is no longer guided by genuine need, but by profit, prestige, and competitive pressure to publish and speak. In this epistemic marketplace, institutions and individuals continually generate content—research papers, news stories, expert opinions, and historical evidence—flooding the public sphere with overlapping, contradictory, or trivial claims. The more facts are produced, the more difficult it becomes to discern which are relevant or reliable. Language itself becomes saturated, losing its referential clarity. Ideas circulate without anchoring, stripped from context and function, repeating in endless loops across platforms and headlines. As in the case of overproduction of goods, this overproduction of facts leads not to abundance in understanding, but to a collapse of epistemic value—what might be called intellectual deflation. This crisis mirrors the capitalist cycle where oversupply leads to falling prices and unsold inventories. Here, the surplus of facts cheapens meaning. Slogans replace analysis, buzzwords substitute for argument, and publications outpace reflection. The system rewards the volume of output over depth, novelty over nuance, visibility over veracity. In academia, the pressure to publish leads to fragmented or redundant studies, in media, the need for attention favours sensationalism over substance. Just as overproduced goods are sometimes discarded or devalued, information is now consumed rapidly, forgotten quickly, and often discarded before it is digested. The abundance of facts paradoxically results in a famine of understanding. The structural cause is the same: overinvestment in production infrastructure without proportional concern for use, application, or comprehension. The digital revolution, like the industrial one before it, has enabled an unprecedented acceleration of

production. But when every subject generates thousands of articles, and every debate is instantly refracted through a thousand rhetorical prisms, knowledge fragments into noise. The result is a paralysis of judgment. Like unsold goods cluttering warehouses, unprocessed facts fill archives, timelines, and minds with unusable excess. What Henry George observed about economic goods applies here to intellectual ones: the problem is not absolute overproduction, but relative excess. One may crave insight but drown in irrelevant detail. One might need coherence yet face a torrent of disconnected assertions. The disproportion between different types of information—like between shoes and handkerchiefs in George's example—means that some ideas are overproduced while others, often those most urgently needed, remain neglected. The imbalance is not just informational but ethical, privileging what is profitable or clickable over what is vital or true. Marx identified in capitalism a tragic paradox: material plenty coexisting with spiritual and social poverty. Today's epistemological crisis reflects a similar condition—cognitive abundance alongside a collapse of meaning. More facts do not yield more truth, just as more products do not ensure well-being. Instead, the oversupply of facts creates new power structures: those who can manipulate the flow, frame the discourse, or declare what counts as knowledge now control the means of epistemic production. Unless this cycle is broken—unless meaning is restored through restraint, discernment, and genuine epistemic care—the overproduction of facts will continue to erode the very possibility of understanding. In this new economy of thought, clarity has become scarce, and knowledge—like truth—risk becoming unsellable.

'Say More Law'

Say's Law of markets, named after French economist Jean-Baptiste Say, holds that producing goods and services generates the income to buy them, so supply creates its own demand and general overproduction cannot persist. Say's Law, reimagined for the age of information, might read: 'The more words produced, the more those words generate demand for even more words'. In this worldview, expression becomes both currency and commodity—each opinion, theory, or slogan not only fulfils a desire to speak but creates the perceived need for someone else to say something else in response. As Keynes once paraphrased, 'supply creates its own demand'—but in the economy of discourse, the oversupply of ideas fuels a cycle of compulsive reproduction, where statements are exchanged not for truth, but for other statements. One speaks, writes, or posts not to reach understanding, but to remain part of the great churn of mutual citation, trending reaction, and intellectual pageantry. In this regime, there is no true excess of speech—just unprocessed language waiting for rebranding. Every claim becomes justification for the next claim. Every article demands a counterpoint, every insight a hot take. 'Say more', the algorithm whispers—not because meaning is lacking, but because engagement is everything. In this rhetorical marketplace, one's ability to speak establishes one is right to be heard, and one's relevance depends not on clarity or depth, but on output. No demand can exist without prior assertion. To critique, you must first contribute. To resist, you must amplify. The cycle is self-sustaining. Of course, overproduction of language raises its own ecological questions—not of landfills, but of mindfills. The byproduct of all this expressive productivity is not plastic or carbon dioxide, but cognitive overload, epistemic fatigue, and semantic pollution. Meaning becomes the linguistic equivalent of smog: omnipresent, formless, and increasingly toxic. Concepts lose their edges through overuse. Slogans crowd out arguments. Metaphors mutate into hashtags. The intellectual environment is degraded not by silence, but by compulsive repetition. The costs are real. More metaphors than necessary are extracted from cultural memory, mined from ancient texts, or quarried from past revolutions. More theoretical models are emitted, each claiming to explain the world more accurately than

the last, while creating a fog through which no world can clearly be seen. Ideas become debris—floating, overlapping, never settling. Just as physical overproduction wastes materials, informational overproduction wastes attention and dissolves trust. But in the world of 'Say More', none of this is a flaw—it is the model. The ability to generate discourse has become an end. Institutions reward frequency over substance, platforms favour virality over verification, and public opinion is shaped less by deliberation than by saturation. In the modern marketplace of ideas, Say's law has mutated into a cycle of compulsive expression, where each word, theory, or opinion generates demand for more of the same. This oversupply of discourse floods attention spans, dilutes meaning, and turns knowledge into noise. Like surplus goods, surplus ideas lose value, creating a glut of unread articles, unexamined claims, and rhetorical pollution. Rather than fostering understanding, the system rewards volume over clarity, reaction over reflection. In this 'Say More' linguistic economy, truth becomes secondary to visibility, and intellectual overproduction mirrors its industrial counterpart—producing not insight, but excess. Overproduction of language is no longer an unintended consequence—it is the default condition of thought under informational capitalism. And under this law, silence is not gold but failure. 'Say More' is not a suggestion. It is a demand embedded in the infrastructure of visibility, credibility, and power. To say less is to disappear. To stop speaking is to lose one's place in the economy of presence. There may be no such thing as too many words—for those who profit from noise. But for those seeking understanding, Say's Law has become a trap: a law of diminishing meaning enforced by excess.

The epistemological crisis

In 'The Epistemological (Not Reproducibility) Crisis[471]'John Park argues that what is often called the reproducibility crisis in science is an epistemological crisis. The problem is not simply that some studies cannot be replicated. It is that much of the knowledge claimed by scientific papers is not knowledge at all. This is especially true in medicine, where statistical methods like null hypothesis testing and the standard P-value threshold of 0.05 have created a flood of results that are misleading, shallow, or false. Park identifies three underlying problems: the problem of induction, the limits of epistemological access, and the dangers of information overload—what he calls the iatrogenics of information. The problem of induction is philosophical but real. Scientific knowledge builds on the assumption that past patterns can predict future outcomes. But this kind of reasoning has no absolute guarantee. You can collect as much data as you want and still be wrong. The second issue, epistemological access, refers to how raw data often fails to capture the complexity of the phenomena under study. Simple measurements may not connect meaningfully to the truths scientists are trying to uncover. Finally, the iatrogenics of information suggests that too much low-quality data can harm science. In medicine, it can lead to bad decisions and failed treatments. Yet, as Park points out, the crisis is deeper than the replication of results. It is about the erosion of scientific meaning. The misuse of statistics—through practices like P-hacking or data dredging—encourages researchers to produce results that appear significant but are meaningless. Journals, pressured to publish novel findings, rarely reward careful or negative results. The system prioritises quantity over insight. Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions helps make sense of this. In 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', Kuhn described how science does not progress in a straight line. Instead, it lurches from one dominant worldview, or paradigm, to another when the old one can no longer explain new data. A crisis emerges when anomalies accumulate—

[471] Park, J. (2020) 'The Epistemological (Not Reproducibility) Crisis', The American Journal of Medicine, 133(1), pp. 5–6.

observations that do not fit—and scientists begin to question the tools, assumptions, and goals of their work. In Park's view, science today may be reaching such a point. The dominant paradigm—relying on significance testing and narrow statistical inference—is faltering. Researchers are producing mountains of papers, but confidence in their findings is falling. Scientists are starting to ask deeper questions about what counts as evidence and how truth is established. This is not just a methodological problem. It strikes at the heart of scientific epistemology. If the structures used to validate knowledge are failing, then the knowledge itself is unstable. This calls not for minor reforms but for a broader transformation. A new paradigm may need to emerge—one that focuses less on formal significance and more on the robustness, clarity, and transparency of evidence.

Consequences of false language

The epistemological crisis reveals that the language of science, once trusted as a vehicle for truth, has become a system of rhetorical control—generating authority rather than understanding. Scientific discourse now often produces not knowledge of reality, but elaborate frameworks of statistical persuasion designed to influence public opinion, secure funding, and maintain institutional power. What masquerades as objective insight is frequently little more than performative certainty, built on unstable foundations. In this sense, science no longer uncovers the nature of things but constructs narratives that fit within prevailing paradigms and power structures. The crisis is not merely about faulty methods or irreproducible results—it is about a loss of epistemic credibility, where language no longer refers meaningfully to the world. Until this is confronted, scientific language will continue to circulate as ideology, not as inquiry. The crisis shaking modern science is not just about the failure to replicate experiments. As John Park argues, it is an epistemological crisis, rooted in flawed methods for producing and validating knowledge. This collapse of certainty spreads far beyond the laboratory. The way people construct meaning in culture, the humanities, and especially language, is affected. If science, long considered the most rigorous path to truth, is unstable, then the very structure of how humans communicate and understand knowledge begins to wobble too. The humanities have always lived with ambiguity. Fields like philosophy, literature, and history often deal in interpretation rather than measurement. Yet even these disciplines rest on shared assumptions about evidence, coherence, and meaning. If scientific methods no longer offer firm ground, then the idea of objective knowledge—once taken for granted even when critiqued—becomes more suspect. Interpretive disciplines may further embrace relativism, not out of conviction, but because the ideal of shared truth has become harder to defend. Language, already seen as a filter for reality, becomes even more opaque. Terms like 'truth' or 'evidence' start to feel provisional, contingent, or even obsolete. Culturally, this creates a deep shift. For over a century, science has been associated with progress. Its methods seemed reliable, its findings stable. That confidence is eroding. If statistical tests can be manipulated, if published results are frequently wrong, then knowledge itself seems fragile. Public trust disintegrates with it. The notion that science can guide policy, heal illness, or explain the natural world begins to weaken. As belief in scientific objectivity fades, people turn toward personal beliefs, ideology, or tribal identities. This shift breeds populism, scepticism, and division, as groups no longer agree on what constitutes a fact. Language sits at the centre of this crisis. It is the vehicle through which knowledge is shared, tested, and debated. But language depends on shared meanings. When the institutions that anchor those meanings falter, language itself becomes unstable. Words like 'data', 'proof', or 'scientific' no longer carry the same weight. They become contested, co-opted, or emptied out. In political and social debates, this leads to chaos. Competing narratives clash, not just over values, but over basic definitions. Language loses its grounding. This fragility

leads to increased manipulation. If words are unmoored, they can be used more easily to deceive or persuade. The epistemological crisis in science thus opens the door to a crisis of rhetoric. Language becomes a tool of control rather than understanding. Trust breaks down. Dialogue becomes harder. The boundaries between truth and opinion blur. The epistemological problem in science has broader consequences. If knowledge cannot be trusted, then neither can the language used to express it. This demands a new kind of vigilance—not only about methods or data, but about the words used to claim truth. Language must be re-examined, not as a neutral medium, but as a force that shapes, distorts, or preserves what humans believe they know.

Great betrayal of science

In 'The Great Betrayal: Fraud in Science[472]', Horace Freeland Judson draws attention to an uncomfortable truth: fraud in science is not a recent or rare phenomenon, but a long-standing and growing issue. He begins by reminding us that errors and abnormalities have long aided discovery. William Harvey learnt how the heart functions by observing abnormal rhythms in dying animals. The study of genetic defects became central to understanding the human genome. Scientists have often used what is broken to understand what is whole. But fraud, unlike natural defects, is not an accidental disruption. It is a betrayal of the process itself. Judson argues that scientific misconduct—fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism—is both more widespread and more damaging than institutions admit. Whistleblowers who call out misconduct are often punished, not rewarded. Meanwhile, the systems meant to prevent fraud, like peer review, are weakened by conflicts of interest, overproduction, and institutional pressures. The sheer volume of published studies makes it hard to separate truth from noise, and even harder to correct errors once they are embedded in the literature. Science is often presented as self-correcting. But Judson shows that the structures meant to safeguard it—editorial boards, reviewers, professional codes—are under strain. Electronic publishing, which once promised openness and access, also enabled faster and looser dissemination of unchecked work. Mentorship, once a vital ethical anchor, has declined. Younger researchers are often left to navigate an increasingly competitive system alone, vulnerable to the temptation to publish quickly or manipulate data. The decay is not isolated to science. Judson links it to a wider culture of dishonesty. The 1990s saw financial disasters—Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco—reveal deep corruption in corporate America. Even auditing firms like Arthur Andersen collapsed under the weight of their complicity. The collapse was not just financial; it was ethical. From business to science, Judson sees a society struggling to maintain moral integrity under the weight of competition, greed, and performance metrics. He also traces the typology of scientific fraud back to Charles Babbage, who identified categories like hoaxing, forging, trimming, and cooking. These practices—ranging from outright invention of data to selective presentation—are still familiar. Even revered scientists like Newton, Mendel, and Millikan have been accused of cutting corners. The question, then and now, is whether the ends justify the means. Do we forgive fraud when the result proves true? Judson warns that such rationalisations weaken the moral fabric of science. What complicates this even more is the increasing reliance on technical innovation. Breakthrough methods often precede breakthroughs in knowledge. Yet rapid innovation also makes replication harder. Limited funding for reproducibility studies, especially in complex fields like biology, means that fraudulent results can remain unchallenged for years. The incentives to publish, to win grants, and to impress peers are stronger than the incentives to be cautious, honest, or rigorous. Fraud, Judson insists, is not an aberration. It is a defect that reveals what science has become—an enterprise caught between its noble ideals and

[472] Judson, H.F. (2004) The Great Betrayal: Fraud in Science. Harcourt.

the pressures of modern systems. The integrity of science rests not just on individual honesty, but on the environments in which scientists work. Unless those environments reward ethical behaviour and prioritise quality over quantity, misconduct will persist. Judson's message is not cynical but urgent. Science is one of the few human pursuits that can truly transform lives. But it must be protected from the erosion of its principles. Fraud is not only a betrayal of science. It is a destruction of the future it promises.

Problems of peer review

In the book 'Science, Truth, and Democracy[473]', Philip Kitcher emphasises that scientific inquiry should remain free from external pressures—moral, political, or religious—especially when shaping research or evaluating evidence. However, as Richard Smith argues, the peer review process, central to scientific validation, is riddled with flaws. It is slow, expensive, inconsistent, and susceptible to bias. Despite these weaknesses, peer review has become deeply embedded in the identity of modern science. After World War II, publication became the defining marker of scientific legitimacy. Once published, research enters a communal process of evaluation, extension, and correction. Yet this ideal rarely matches reality. Peer review today faces increasing scrutiny. At the Second International Congress on Peer Review in 1993, Drummond Rennie highlighted a core contradiction: the best reviewers are often competitors of those whose work they assess. This conflict of interest has grown sharper in a world where grants, tenure, and reputations hinge on publications. The system encourages researchers to favour results that are sensational or trendy, while more cautious, complex work struggles to gain recognition. Another issue is inconsistency. The expansion of scientific journals has led to a fragmented landscape where standards vary widely. A paper rejected by one journal may be accepted by another with minimal changes. This variability undermines the idea that peer review is a robust filter for quality. Instead, it often functions more as a gatekeeping ritual that reinforces prestige hierarchies. Anonymity is another source of contention. Traditional peer review is usually blind, with reviewers remaining anonymous. Advocates say this encourages honesty. Critics argue it promotes irresponsibility. Fiona Godlee, Richard Smith, and Rennie have pushed for open reviewing, where identities are known and comments are made public. At the 'BMJ', experiments with open peer review found no decrease in quality. In fact, transparency made reviewers more thoughtful and accountable. This shift signals a broader transformation. Open peer review is part of a movement toward reforming scientific publishing. New models challenge the idea that peer review should be the sole arbiter of validity. Platforms now exist where preprints are made public and reviewed post-publication by the wider community. While such systems are still evolving, they offer a glimpse of what a more transparent and inclusive scientific culture might look like. Yet reform is not simple. As the number of researchers and papers grows, the burden on reviewers becomes unsustainable. Many scientists, especially early-career ones, feel pressured to review for free, often with little recognition. Meanwhile, senior academics are overwhelmed by requests. This imbalance fuels delays and contributes to the uneven quality of reviews. The peer review system is not beyond repair, but its flaws can no longer be ignored. Greater openness, better incentives, and clearer standards are needed. The goal is not to abandon judgment but to refine it—ensuring that review serves science rather than distorting it.

[473] Kitcher, P. (2001) Science, Truth, and Democracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Why most published research findings are false

In 'Why Most Published Research Findings Are False[474]' John Ioannidis argues that a large portion of published research may not reflect real discoveries but false findings. In his widely discussed article, he explains how statistical methods, structural biases, and systemic pressures combine to distort scientific truth. His claim is not that researchers are dishonest, but that the systems in which they work often produce unreliable results. One of the core problems is the misuse of statistical significance. The common threshold of $p < 0.05$, originally intended as a rule of thumb, has become a rigid standard. Researchers often manipulate their data or analysis until they achieve this value. This practice, sometimes called 'p-hacking', increases the likelihood of false positives. A statistically significant result might look convincing on the surface, but it often does not reflect a real effect, especially when study designs are weak or underpowered. Ioannidis emphasises that studies with small sample sizes are particularly vulnerable. Small studies produce more variable results, which means a significant result might be due to chance. In fields where many hypotheses are tested without strong prior evidence, the chance of finding something that is both significant and true is even lower. The result is a research landscape filled with claims that are unlikely to hold up under scrutiny. Bias adds another layer to the problem. It can take many forms—publication bias, selective reporting, and financial conflicts of interest. Journals often prefer positive findings, which means studies with null results are less likely to be published. Researchers, under pressure to publish, may consciously or unconsciously report their results in a way that favours a particular outcome. These patterns distort the scientific literature and create a misleading picture of progress. The overall result is discouraging. When statistical thresholds are misused, when biases are widespread, and when studies are underpowered or poorly designed, it becomes more likely that research findings are false. Even in rigorous fields, the pressure to produce new results can outpace the slow, careful process of scientific validation. Ioannidis proposes a change in how research is evaluated. Rather than relying so heavily on statistical significance, the focus should shift to study design, prior probabilities, replication, and transparency. Larger, well-powered studies with pre-registered methods and open data are more likely to produce trustworthy results. The scientific community needs to resist the lure of novelty and prioritise results that are reproducible and robust. The implications of his work go beyond statistics. It challenges how science is funded, published, and rewarded. When the system values quantity over quality, false findings become inevitable. A deeper cultural shift is needed—one that values careful work over quick results, and truth over appearances.

Overproduction of scientists

In 1927, just twenty-nine scientists attended the legendary Fifth Solvay Conference in Brussels. Among them were the great architects of modern physics—Einstein, Bohr, Schrödinger, Heisenberg, Curie, Planck—seventeen Nobel laureates in one photo. These were not just participants but pioneers, whose ideas shattered classical physics and shaped our understanding of the universe. The image of that conference has become iconic: an elite gathering of minds confronting the fundamental nature of reality. Today, that image seems almost quaint. Science has expanded beyond recognition. Modern scientific congresses host tens of thousands, from chemistry and physics to neuroscience and medicine, transforming elite discussion into mass participation. The American Physical Society draws 10,000 attendees per event; medical conferences can top 50,000. Science, once an artisanal craft, has become a global

[474] Ioannidis, J.P.A. (2005) 'Why Most Published Research Findings Are False', PLoS Medicine, 2(8), e124.

industry. This exponential growth has produced impressive results—but also raised serious concerns. Gianfranco Pacchioni's provocative question, 'Are we too many?' is not just rhetorical. With more than 10 million active researchers worldwide, science is overproducing not just studies but data, theories, and interpretations at a scale few can follow. Between 1996 and 2011 alone, over twenty-five million scientific articles were published. The result is not just a wealth of knowledge—but a flood. Fundamental science, once led by a few brilliant minds tackling grand questions, now risks being buried under a mountain of marginal findings, minor variations, and hyper-specialised micro-studies. The scientific image of the world, instead of simplifying reality, is growing ever more fragmented and abstract. More scientists mean more publications, more jargon, more models, more complexity—until the very clarity science once promised gives way to a fog of competing interpretations. As Pacchioni notes, science is not like plumbing when a discovery is made in Seoul, it need not be repeated in São Paulo. Yet global competition and publication pressure lead thousands to pursue the same questions, replicate similar studies, and generate data with diminishing novelty or significance. The problem is not simply quantity, but quality and direction. The overproduction of truth, as Pacchioni calls it, fragments effort and erodes coherence. Talent is diluted, attention is scattered, and important questions risk being drowned in noise. While the growth of engineers, technicians, and applied scientists may reflect our technological world, fundamental science requires more than numbers—it needs originality, insight, and purpose. Today's challenge is not just producing knowledge, but deciding what knowledge matters, and who gets to pursue it. In an era of unprecedented scientific output, where millions of researchers contribute to an ever-expanding archive of studies, the question is no longer whether we can produce knowledge, but whether we can discern its relevance. The system rewards quantity, novelty, and specialisation—even when the outcome is trivial, redundant, or disconnected from meaningful inquiry. Science has become so institutionalised, so entwined with career advancement and funding cycles, that few dare to question the actual value of their work. But how long can this continue before someone finally stands up and says what everyone quietly suspects? Who will be the first to declare, 'I hold a sinecure position. I know that my research is non-essential[475]'? Until then, the machinery will keep turning—producing truths, half-truths, and unread footnotes—while the essential question remains unasked: not just what science can do, but what it should be for.

Conclusion to Vol.I: LINGUA PERVERSA

1. HERMENEUTICS

1.1. Hermeneutics

(The endless dialogue: The hermeneutic condition of language)

'Understanding is not a reproductive activity but a productive one'.

— Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics and Criticism

'Texts are not things to be deciphered but voices to be heard'.

[475] This applies to the author of this book.

— Jean Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the practice and theory of interpretation, originally rooted in reading sacred texts, but now extended to many areas of human understanding. The word comes from the Greek hermēneuein, meaning to interpret or translate, and is associated with hermeneus, a translator. Some trace its origins even deeper, to pre-Greek roots. The earliest philosophical use appears in Aristotle's 'On Interpretation', where he explored how words can represent thoughts and how logic depends on the form of language. From its beginning, hermeneutics has dealt with the question of how language expresses, distorts, or reveals meaning. The myth of Hermes, the messenger god, casts a long shadow over the discipline. Hermes communicated divine messages to mortals but also misled and deceived. This image captures a core ambiguity in language—it can guide or misguide, clarify, or confuse. Socrates noted the dual nature of words: they can lead to truth, but also to falsehood. This is why interpretation needs discipline. Hermeneutics arose as an effort to read not only what texts say, but what they might mean beneath their surface, especially when meanings are unclear, contradictory, or hidden. Historically, hermeneutics developed alongside religious traditions. In Mesopotamia, scribes interpreted myths and rituals to decode divine intent. Jewish scholars, such as those following Hillel, developed complex principles to reconcile the layers of meaning in the Torah. The Islamic tradition, particularly in Quranic studies, created detailed systems to understand language, resolve tensions, and apply moral law. In India, the Mimamsa school analysed the Vedas with precision, aiming to understand the moral and ritual duties encoded in the texts. Buddhist interpretation, meanwhile, sought to distinguish absolute truth from conventional speech, helping practitioners move toward enlightenment. In Christianity, interpretation deepened through thinkers like Augustine, who argued in 'De Doctrina Christiana' that humility and love were essential to reading scripture properly. Biblical hermeneutics expanded into a fourfold method—literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical. Each layer offered a different path to meaning, connecting surface narrative with hidden spiritual insight. With the rise of modern humanism, interpretation moved beyond theology. In the 15th century, Lorenzo Valla used hermeneutics to expose the forgery of the 'Donation of Constantine'. This marked a shift from religious to historical-critical methods. Later, Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed that understanding texts involves both grammatical analysis and psychological empathy. To interpret is to understand another mind through their words. In the 20th century, Heidegger and Gadamer expanded hermeneutics into a broader philosophy of being and understanding. Interpretation became circular—each reading shapes and is shaped by the reader's assumptions. This hermeneutic circle, far from being a flaw, was seen as the necessary structure of all understanding. Language, in this view, is not a mirror of thought but a world we inhabit. Hermeneutics now includes voices from across philosophy, from Ricoeur's narrative theory to Derrida's deconstruction. Despite their differences, they all respond to a basic challenge: how to make sense of meaning when language is both our tool and our obstacle.

On interpretation

Aristotle's 'On Interpretation' is one of the first works to study how language and logic are connected. It begins by looking at simple propositions—statements that are either true or false. Aristotle examines the structure of language and how words can represent thoughts. Though the sounds of words vary between languages, the mental ideas behind them are the

same. This view allows language to function as a symbolic system where words point to shared human experiences. He draws a distinction between nouns and verbs. Nouns refer to subjects without indicating time. Verbs, by contrast, imply time and action. Sentences only make sense, Aristotle says, when they combine words into affirmations or negations. A sentence is not just a string of words; it carries a claim about the world. He shows how logic depends on this structure. Statements can affirm or deny something, and each has a logical counterpart. This structure forms what is now known as the square of opposition. It helps to categorise propositions based on whether they are universal or, affirmative or negative. One of the more famous parts of the text deals with future contingents. Aristotle poses a question: if there will or will not be a sea battle tomorrow, is it already true or false today? If the answer is yes, then the future seems fixed and necessary. But if it is not already determined, then the law of excluded middle—the idea that something must either be true or false—does not apply. This problem introduces uncertainty into logic and has had lasting influence on debates about time, chance, and prediction. Later thinkers extended Aristotle's symbolic approach. Boethius, writing in late antiquity, gave this idea a more emotional depth. In 'On the Consolation of Philosophy', he uses language not just to argue, but to reflect and mourn. Though his work is about fate, suffering, and divine order, it follows the same idea that language gives shape to inner thought. Boethius helped bridge classical logic with medieval spiritual inquiry, showing that reason and emotion can be expressed through the same symbolic system of language. In modern times, especially in postmodern theory, this whole approach has been challenged. Thinkers like Derrida question whether words ever truly refer to fixed meanings. Meaning, they argue, always shifts. The idea that language can clearly mirror thought or truth is, to them, a comforting illusion. Yet even these critiques still work within the tradition Aristotle helped define. Postmodernism did not abandon interpretation; it multiplied its layers. Where Aristotle tried to fix the link between word and meaning, later thinkers exposed its instability. Still, the problem of how to understand language remains central. Whether one believes in stable meanings or endless interpretations, the need to interpret never disappears. From Aristotle's early logic to Boethius' symbolic language of grief, to postmodern scepticism, the act of interpreting language links all these moments in thought.

Linguistics

Hermeneutics and linguistics share a common interest in the meaning of language. While hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation—particularly of texts—linguistics provides the formal tools to understand how language works. The two fields support one another. Hermeneutics asks what a text means, and linguistics helps explain how meaning is formed through structure, context, and use. Syntax, semantics, and pragmatics offer lenses through which language can be broken down and examined, making interpretation more precise. Without this linguistic foundation, interpretation would be guesswork, unanchored from the rules that govern language behaviour. This connection was already visible in Aristotle's early reflections on language. He understood words as signs of mental experiences, noting that even if languages differ in sound, they share the same logical principles. This observation still resonates today. Understanding meaning involves more than decoding words—it means grasping how language reflects, shapes, and limits human thought. Philology, the historical study of language and texts, adds another layer to this relationship. It shows how language evolves and how meaning shifts over time. Philologists trace the changes in vocabulary, grammar, and usage that influence how a text might have been understood in its original context. This is particularly important in interpreting ancient or religious texts. A single word may have carried different meanings at different moments in history. The philological method

grounds interpretation in historical evidence, revealing how texts functioned within their cultural setting. In doing so, philology supports the hermeneutic idea that meaning is not fixed but arises from an ongoing dialogue between the past and present. Literature, meanwhile, puts this interplay into motion. Literary texts are rarely straightforward. They use metaphor, ambiguity, rhythm, and tone to create meanings that exceed literal language. Hermeneutics, when applied to literature, helps uncover these layers. It asks how a story reflects identity, emotion, and ideology. It also considers how different readers might interpret the same text in different ways. In this way, literature becomes a testing ground for hermeneutic theories. Reading a poem or novel is not just about understanding words; it is about hearing the echoes of culture, history, and human emotion within them. Together, linguistics, philology, and literature show that interpretation is not a single act but a process that moves between structure, history, and imagination. Language is never neutral. It carries the traces of time and the intentions of those who use it. Hermeneutics, then, is not only about finding meaning but also about understanding how meaning is made and remade in every act of communication.

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics

Friedrich Schleiermacher[476] transformed hermeneutics from a technical method into a philosophical theory of understanding. Before him, interpretation was confined to specific fields like theology or classical philology. Hermeneutics was mostly a tool used only when a text seemed unclear. Schleiermacher's aim was different. He wanted to establish a universal theory that applied to all acts of understanding—spoken or written, sacred or secular. This ambition marked a turning point. Later thinkers saw it as a major break with the past, the moment when hermeneutics became a general discipline. The challenge with Schleiermacher's work is that it survives in fragments. Between 1805 and 1833, he gave several lectures on hermeneutics, but only partial notes remain. These lectures help trace how Schleiermacher's thinking developed over time. Earlier theories relied on fixed principles, often rooted in religion or logic. Schleiermacher rejected that foundation. He argued that understanding is not something automatic. Misunderstanding is the norm, and real understanding is something one must work toward. He focused on the gap between interpreter and text, between one mind and another. This gap can never fully disappear. It must be bridged, moment by moment, through interpretation. For Schleiermacher, language is central. All thought is shaped by language. You cannot think clearly without words. At the same time, individuals personalise language, bending it to express unique ideas. Hermeneutics, then, must work between two limits: the shared rules of language and the private meanings of an individual speaker. The process is never fixed. It always shifts between general and between structure and intuition. He divided hermeneutics into two parts. Grammatical interpretation looks at language and its rules. Psychological interpretation tries to enter the mind of the author. Both are necessary. Words must be understood both in context and in relation to the inner world of their creator. Schleiermacher also emphasised the hermeneutic circle: one must understand the whole to grasp the parts, but the parts must be known to understand the whole. This circular motion is not a flaw. It is the natural rhythm of understanding. One of his most famous, and controversial, claims is that the interpreter should understand the author better than the author understood himself. This does not mean outsmarting the author. It means grasping the deeper unity between language and thought that may not have been clear even to the one who first wrote the text. Schleiermacher's

[476] Schleiermacher, F. (1959) Hermeneutik: Nach den Handschriften, edited by H. Kimmerle, Heidelberg.

hermeneutics is not about fixed rules. It is a reflective practice, grounded in language, aimed at bridging the gap between people. It remains a foundation for modern theories of interpretation.

Hermeneutics and historicism

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics reshaped how historians think about understanding. His emphasis on the individuality of the text and the interplay between parts and whole became a model for German historiography. Hermeneutics reshaped how historical understanding was conceived, emphasizing the individuality of each text and the interplay between parts and whole as a model for interpreting the past. Historical events came to be seen as gaining meaning only in relation to larger processes, just as sentences derive meaning from their place in a complete work. Testimonies and fragments of the past were no longer inert facts but signs to be interpreted within a broader context. Philological training encouraged historians to approach the past with precision and without imposing present-day prejudices, seeking to understand each era on its own terms as something complete in itself. Philology was understood not merely as the study of texts but as a key to human culture, re-engaging with what had already been expressed—most fully in language. To study language was to study the human spirit, and so history and philology became parallel pursuits aimed at uncovering human meaning as preserved in language, thought, and culture. Interpretation in this sense was multi-dimensional, combining grammatical, psychological, historical, and literary perspectives. This link between hermeneutics and historicism gave rise to methods that traced the unity of history without forcing it into rigid philosophical systems, while also insisting on disciplined research, critical evaluation, and contextual interpretation. The move from theological certainty to historical inquiry marked a shift in how truth was understood. Instead of being given, truth had to be interpreted, and interpretation was never complete. History, like language, was a field of signs pointing beyond themselves.

Philosophical hermeneutics

Wilhelm Dilthey[477] remains an underappreciated thinker, partly because his central contributions—including 'Introduction to the Sciences of the Spirit' and 'The Construction of the Historical World'—have not been widely accessible. Even in Germany and the United States, efforts to publish and systematise his writings are recent. The delay reflects the complexity and breadth of his work, rather than any national oversight. Dilthey has been called 'the philosopher of historicism'. This is accurate if one understands historicism as the belief that self-understanding depends on grasping the historical forces that shape human life. Dilthey's philosophical goal was to respond to the new sense of historical consciousness that had emerged in the modern era. This required redefining philosophy as a discipline rooted in the interpretation of lived experience. Historicity, for Dilthey, was not just the fact of something having happened in the past—it was a layered concept involving the singularity of events, the rational progression of history, and the deep connection between past and present through tradition. Dilthey's understanding of philosophy moves away from Hegel's speculative idealism. While Hegel viewed history as a rational process guided by the Absolute Spirit, culminating in the philosopher's realisation of universal truth, Dilthey viewed such claims with suspicion. He argued that philosophy, far from being a final knowledge, always comes late. It reflects on what has already occurred. It does not produce truths from pure thought but analyses life, which cannot itself be reduced to intellectual categories. Life, for Dilthey, is the ultimate ground of all philosophy—immediate, experienced, and opaque to full explanation. Philosophy,

[477] Ricoeur, P. (1981) Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

then, is a form of self-reflection—what Dilthey called Selbstbesinnung. This concept has no fixed definition in his work but recurs in various forms. It suggests a reflective awareness of life, not an abstract system. Philosophy observes the structures already present in human experience, feelings, and representations. Because of this, philosophy cannot be presuppositionless. It cannot invent its own foundations because those foundations are always found in life itself, which lies beyond the reach of full conceptualisation. Unlike Hegel, Dilthey did not see philosophy as the climax of history, but as a tool for understanding the human world. He emphasised that the humanities—the sciences of man, society, and history—hold the key to self-understanding. These disciplines interpret the symbolic forms through which life expresses itself. In this sense, philosophy becomes a way to mediate between human experiences and general knowledge. It reflects an impulse in consciousness to rise above the accidental and to form meaning through cultural and historical interpretation. Dilthey's philosophical hermeneutics thus offers a powerful alternative to metaphysical systems. It roots understanding in the lived and historical character of human existence, affirming that all knowledge is shaped by life's irreducible complexity and temporal depth.

Hermeneutics and ontology

Martin Heidegger transformed the scope of hermeneutics by linking it directly to ontology. He broke with the older view of interpretation as a secondary, text-bound method, and argued instead that understanding is a basic structure of human existence. This shift removed hermeneutics from the narrow frame of scholarly technique and placed it within the broader context of how humans encounter the world. Understanding, for Heidegger, is not something humans do—it is what humans are. From this perspective, interpretation is not a tool of the humanities but a condition of being. Heidegger's early writings followed the anti-psychologism of German philosophy. In his studies on logic and language, he emphasised that meaning is not just psychological but belongs to another order of reality. This led him to question how meaning connects to objects in the world. Over time, especially after World War I, his focus turned to life itself as the foundation of meaning. Influenced by Dilthey, he argued that life is not a series of mental states but a movement through meaningful situations. Historicity—life's embeddedness in time—became central to his idea of understanding. Heidegger's lectures from 1919 onward began shaping what he would later call 'hermeneutics of facticity'. Here, understanding is no longer about method; it becomes a way of being in the world. To understand something is to live through it, to project oneself toward a possibility within one's concrete situation. This 'thrownness', the condition of finding oneself already in the world, limits and shapes all understanding. It also means that understanding cannot be fully objectified. Attempts to make it into a scientific method, detached from the life of the subject, erase what is most essential—its origin in existence. Heidegger's major work, 'Being and Time[478]', pushed this view further. He argued that understanding operates through a circular movement. One always begins from a pre-understanding shaped by history, language, and culture. Rather than escaping this circle, one must enter it properly. The structure of this movement is not logical but existential. It reflects the way human beings are always already involved in the world. In his later philosophy, Heidegger deepened his inquiry into language. He made a distinction between speaking and saying. Speaking is tied to human expression, but saying reveals being itself. Language, in this view, is not something humans can control; it is something that speaks through them. 'Language is the house of Being', he wrote, suggesting that the essence of existence is disclosed through the word. Poetry, rather than logic, became

[478] Heidegger, M. (1927) Being and Time. Trans. Macquarrie, J. and Robinson, E. Harper & Row.

the model for this kind of saying since it allows truth to emerge without domination or objectification. In the end, Heidegger redefined hermeneutics as the very way humans exist—always interpreting, always situated in history, always addressed by Being. This ontological turn gave hermeneutics a universal role: not just as a theory of interpretation but as the foundation for any attempt to understand meaning at all.

Gadamer on history

Hans-Georg Gadamer's reflections on history are inseparable from the hermeneutical project developed in 'Truth and Method[479]'. Although he is not traditionally classified as a philosopher of history, his work positions historical experience at the centre of philosophical understanding. For Gadamer, history is not an object to be observed from a distance but the very medium in which thought is shaped. Human beings are historically constituted; interpretation is never free from temporal context. This challenges the Enlightenment ideal of objectivity, which seeks to eliminate bias and achieve certainty through detached observation. In contrast, Gadamer argues that understanding is always situated. One's relationship with the past is not neutral but participatory. He rejects the idea that historical knowledge can mirror the methods of the natural sciences. The attempt to treat history as a science, governed by strict methodology and causal laws, misunderstands its nature. Human actions are not predictable forces but contingent and intentional. Causality in history is not mechanical but interpretative. Meaning emerges not from fixed causes but from the retrospective understanding of lived experience. History cannot be reduced to chronology or general laws because the interpreter brings their own historical position to every act of understanding. Gadamer views this embeddedness not as a limitation but as a condition of possibility. Prejudices—understood not as biases but as pre-judgments—are the starting points for interpretation. Rather than eliminating them, hermeneutics calls for critical awareness of their influence. The goal is not objective detachment but dialogical engagement with tradition. Understanding unfolds through a fusion of horizons, where the perspective of the interpreter and the historical text meet and inform each other. Language, in Gadamer's view, is central to this process. It is not simply a tool for conveying thought but the medium in which meaning takes shape. Interpretation is always linguistic, and language itself has a history. It is both inherited and evolving. This makes hermeneutics fundamentally historical since each act of understanding is shaped by a linguistic world already in place. The meaning of a text cannot be fixed because language, like history, is always in motion. Gadamer's approach is not relativistic but responsive. He does not claim that anything can mean anything, but that understanding is always conditioned by the interpreter's historical position. Truth, in the humanities, is not universal and timeless but context-dependent and shaped by experience. It requires sensitivity, judgment, and participation in a shared tradition. There is no final interpretation, only a deepening dialogue with the past. This conception opposes both scientistic historicism and metaphysical absolutism. It affirms that the human relationship with history is lived, not abstract. Historical knowledge is not the neutral collection of facts but an encounter with meaning shaped by time, language, and culture. What people come to know through history is not just the past but themselves. Gadamer's philosophy challenges the ideal of detached reason and restores interpretation to its rightful place: within the ongoing and unfinished process of human understanding. In doing so, he offers a hermeneutics of finitude, grounded not in certainty, but in dialogue, tradition, and historical

[479] Gadamer, H.-G. (2004) Truth and Method. London: Continuum.

being. His insight is that the past is never simply behind us—it continues to speak, and people understand it only by listening from where they stand.

Dynamic nature of the scripture

The traditional view of writing, especially in its nonphonetic forms like mathematical notation, often assumes that meaning exists beyond the moment of expression. These signs appear to point toward timeless truths, abstract and disconnected from history. They suggest that understanding lies in an ideal realm, far from the living act of speaking or reading. In contrast, phonetic writing challenges this idea. It ties meaning to sound, time, and context. The written word, when tied to speech, is always part of a moment—it participates in the here and now. This shift reveals that meaning is not a distant essence but something that unfolds in time, through speech and interpretation. Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics[480] emphasises this temporal dimension of meaning. For him, understanding is not about extracting eternal truths from fixed forms. It is about entering a historical event, a living encounter with language. When he speaks of the Word becoming flesh, he refers to the idea that meaning is no longer detached or purely spiritual. Instead, it enters the world. It becomes human, finite, yet no less profound. In this way, language is not a tool we apply but a process we participate in. Each time we speak or write, we are not just using words—we are creating meaning. Finding the right word is not a mechanical choice. It is an act of discovery, where the speaker or writer feels out the right expression in the context of a specific moment. This process is speculative. Words are not only signs that point to meaning; they are more like images that reflect what they signify. Like a reflection in a mirror, the word captures the thing and shows it anew. It contains both its form and its meaning, allowing interpretation without losing its connection to the original sense. Interpretation, then, is never a repetition. It is always a renewal, shaped by time and the reader's position within it. The same applies to the idea of the classic. Traditionally, the classic was seen as timeless. But after the eighteenth century, writers like Samuel Johnson and thinkers like Hegel began to see it differently. The classic became something from the past, a relic that needs to be revived and reinterpreted. Each generation reclaims it differently, reshaping its meaning according to new needs. The classic survives not by staying the same, but by allowing itself to change. This dynamic applies especially when a classic takes on the weight of Scripture. A text that functions as Scripture does not just sit on a shelf. It speaks to the reader. It offers not only historical insight but personal relevance. Critics have debated whether such texts should be treated as sacred or open to critique like any other writing. Gadamer suggests that every act of understanding is a fusion of the past and the present. The meaning of Scripture—or any classic—arises not from its fixed origin but from the ongoing relationship between the text and its readers. In this way, Scripture and classic texts are both dynamic. They are not just read; they are lived. Meaning is not fixed in them, but always in motion, unfolding through speech, interpretation, and history.

Language and meaning

Hermeneutics begins with the effort to understand meaning—how it is formed, expressed, and interpreted. While traditionally focused on written texts, hermeneutics today includes the interpretation of other symbolic forms such as gestures, images, rituals, and artworks. These, too, are bound to language, since even nonverbal signs often find their meaning through words.

[480] Gadamer, H.-G. (2010) in Kearney, R. and Zimmermann, J. (eds) Scripture and Hermeneutics: Exploring the Boundaries. London: Routledge.

In his chapter[481] from 'The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics', Daniel Dahlstrom outlines how modern hermeneutics approaches language and meaning by drawing primarily on German thinkers like Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, while occasionally contrasting their views with Anglo-American perspectives. Communication involves more than just speaking. It depends on a structure where four elements interact: the speaker, the message, the meaning, and the listener. This structure, which Dahlstrom calls the 'hermeneutical quadrangle', illustrates how understanding happens through a network of relations. Words, gestures, or images serve as markers. These markers are then interpreted to grasp the intended meaning, but that meaning is rarely limited to the speaker's intent. Instead, meaning emerges from the entire situation: who is speaking, how they are saying it, who is listening, and under what circumstances. Even in simple conversations, meaning can break down. Misunderstandings are common not only because language is ambiguous but because the interpreter always brings their own assumptions and history into the process. Communication is fragile. Listeners may miss the point or misunderstand entirely, and speakers may not fully know what they intend to express. Words carry layers of meaning that shift with time, setting, and social context. Technical fields like law or science, for example, develop their own vocabularies, shaped by centuries of tradition. The interpreter must unpack these layers. Interpretation, then, is the act of uncovering what a linguistic expression means in a specific context. Consider a mother trying to understand her baby's cry. The cry might signal hunger, discomfort, or fear. She interprets it based not just on sound, but on a shared background of bodily cues, timing, and experience. This process is grounded in prior understanding—something already known that must now be made clear. It is also shaped by the interpreter's assumptions. These preconceptions form what hermeneutics calls the 'hermeneutical situation'. In this view, meaning is never just what the author meant. A text, once spoken or written, takes on a life beyond the author's intent. Schleiermacher emphasised reconstructing the individual's thought, while Gadamer stressed how meanings evolve over time through dialogue with tradition. The goal is not just to retrieve a message, but to participate in its development. The ideal of hermeneutics is to grasp meaning as it arises through language, in the interplay between universal linguistic forms and individual expression. Language is not static. It changes with its users and is reshaped through interpretation. Hermeneutics shows that understanding is not about fixing meaning but about engaging with it—listening, questioning, and reinterpreting as part of an ongoing human dialogue.

1.2. Interpretetion

(Unfolding meaning: The hermeneutics of communication)

'Interpretation is not the application of a method but the unfolding of a relation'.

— Paul Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations

Language philosophy

Hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation, is not exclusive to continental traditions. It has clear connections with analytic philosophy, especially through its reflections on language. One of the most important figures bridging these traditions is Ludwig Wittgenstein. His

[481] Dahlstrom, D. (2014) 'Language and Meaning', in Malpas, J. and Gander, H.-H. (eds) The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics. London: Routledge.

contributions reshaped how language, meaning, and understanding are viewed within philosophy. In 'The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics', Lee Braver[482] explores how Wittgenstein's thought intersects with the core concerns of hermeneutics, especially regarding the interpretative nature of language. In his early work, 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus', Wittgenstein proposed that language mirrors reality. Sentences were understood as logical pictures of facts. Words, or names, pointed to simple, indivisible objects. The arrangement of these names in a proposition created a picture that either matched the world or did not. This model of language emphasised precision and logical form. It was based on the idea that meaning results from a clear, objective link between signs and the world. But Wittgenstein later abandoned this view. In 'Philosophical Investigations', he argued that language does not work through direct reference alone. The meaning of a word is not simply tied to what it names. Instead, meaning is found in how words are used—in their function within shared forms of life. He introduced the concept of 'language-games' to show that language operates within flexible, rule-governed activities. These games are not private or abstract but embedded in public, social behaviour. Naming, understanding, and rule-following are all part of these games, and none are purely mechanical. Even pointing to an object depends on prior training, expectations, and interpretation. Understanding language, then, is not about decoding fixed meanings but navigating through a context of shared practices. When someone speaks, the listener must interpret not only the words but also their tone, timing, and social situation. A rule, once stated, does not carry its own interpretation—it must be applied, and the way it is applied can vary. There is no private language because any use of signs must be publicly learnable and communally understood. This emphasis on public practice turns language into a living, dynamic activity rather than a static code. Wittgenstein's later work dismantles the idea of perfect clarity in language. Instead, it reveals language as open-ended, shaped by culture, habit, and use. Every expression is potentially ambiguous. No sentence guarantees a single, fixed interpretation. This realisation brings him close to the concerns of hermeneutics, which also sees interpretation as central to understanding. Language is not transparent; it requires participation, reflection, and a constant back-and-forth between speaker and listener. In this light, hermeneutics and analytic philosophy converge on a shared insight: meaning is never just given but always developed through interpretation. Braver shows how Wittgenstein's philosophy helps uncover the interpretative foundations of even the most ordinary forms of communication. Language becomes a process, not a product—a space where understanding is never final but always negotiated.

'Fusion of horizons'

Nicholas Davey[483], in 'The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics', examines how hermeneutics interacts with structuralism and post-structuralism, especially through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's idea of 'Structure, Word and Event'. This triad shows the tension between three views of language: as a formal system, as a bearer of meaning, and as a lived event. Structuralism tends to prioritise the system. Saussure's idea of langue—language as structure—takes precedence over parole, or actual speech. Hermeneutic thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer argue the opposite. For them, ordinary language use—what Heidegger calls Sprache—is not secondary but foundational. It reveals the world and cannot be reduced to a static code. Structuralism avoids subjectivity by focusing on the internal relations of signs. It

[482] Braver, L. (2014) 'Hermeneutics and Language Philosophy', in Malpas, J. and Gander, H.-H. (eds) The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics. London: Routledge.

[483] Davey, N. (2014) 'Hermeneutics, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism', in Malpas, J. and Gander, H.-H. (eds) The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics. London: Routledge.

draws on Nietzsche's suspicion of fixed essence and identity. But hermeneutics insists that meaning happens in lived experience. Language is not a neutral carrier of truth. It performs, reveals, and transforms. Meaning does not sit passively in a text but comes alive in interpretation. This brings us to the question of truth. For structuralism, truth can be found in the regularities of sign systems. For hermeneutics, truth is less about correspondence and more about disclosure. It appears in the moment of understanding, always shaped by history and context. Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Heidegger suggest that truth happens in language, not beyond it. Meaning is never final. It changes with every new interpretation. This fluidity is not a flaw but a condition of language itself. Post-structuralism pushes this even further. Thinkers like Derrida argue that meaning is always deferred, never fully present. Every word refers to other words, setting off a chain of references that never ends. There is no stable origin. Language is a play of differences. Hermeneutics does not deny this instability, but it also resists total scepticism. Interpretation may be open-ended, but it is not arbitrary. Dialogue, tradition, and shared understanding help ground it. Gadamer's idea of the 'fusion of horizons' captures this. Different viewpoints can come together, not by erasing differences, but by expanding mutual understanding. Ricoeur and Gadamer both see language as the site where subjectivity and the world meet. The self is not isolated. It is shaped by language, history, and culture. Meaning arises from this relationship. The subject is not the master of meaning but is always involved in a process of negotiation. Understanding becomes a back-and-forth movement between what is said and what is heard, between past meanings and new possibilities. In the end, the contrast between structuralism, post-structuralism, and hermeneutics is not just about theories of language. It reflects deeper views about truth, identity, and the role of the subject. While structuralism analyses systems, and post-structuralism deconstructs them, hermeneutics remains committed to the possibility of understanding through dialogue and openness. Meaning is never fixed, but neither is it meaningless. It unfolds in the tension between tradition and innovation, between structure and speech.

Hermeneutics of action

Paul Ricoeur's work[484] on language and interpretation bridges hermeneutics, structuralism, and post-structuralism. In his triad 'Structure, Word and Event', Ricoeur shows that while linguistic structures are important, they cannot fully explain how meaning happens in real-life communication. Structuralism, shaped by Saussure and later by Levi-Strauss, analyses language as a formal system. But Ricoeur, influenced by Heidegger and Gadamer, sees language as an event—something that unfolds between people. Meaning is not just coded in signs but emerges from speaking, listening, and responding. Ricoeur sees language as rooted in human action, history, and tradition. This view challenges the idea that truth can be fixed by logic or method. Instead, Ricoeur treats truth as something revealed in time. It is not discovered finally but shaped through interpretation and re-interpretation. Meaning unfolds like a story. It is never static. This contrasts with post-structuralism, especially Derrida's idea of endless deferral, where meaning always escapes. Ricoeur does not deny ambiguity, but he does not surrender to it either. He believes understanding is possible, though always provisional. In her reading of Ricoeur, Mara Rainwater emphasises how his theory of narrative adds depth to ethics. Ricoeur distinguishes between the fixed structure of language and its dynamic use in discourse. He argues that identity is not a stable essence, but something formed through stories—what he calls narrative identity. These stories do not just tell who someone is; they shape who that person becomes. For Ricoeur, selfhood is not isolated. It emerges in relation to

[484] Kearney, R. (ed.) (1996) Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action. London: SAGE.

others and is always in motion. Through narrative, people interpret themselves, their pasts, and their futures. Rainwater connects this to communicative ethics. Ricoeur's focus on language shows that moral responsibility is not only argued but told. Ethics is not limited to rules. It is lived in stories, shaped by how people remember, imagine, and speak. Narrative force transforms facts into meaning and allows people to reframe their experiences. It brings together history and fiction in ways that open new paths for ethical reflection. Richard Kearney takes this further by showing how imagination plays a silent but central role in Ricoeur's thinking. Imagination is not just about creating images. It allows people to refigure time, turning past events into meaningful narratives. These narratives do not simply represent the past. They give it new life and meaning, guiding action in the present. This process, Kearney argues, is inherently ethical. It asks people to imagine others' lives, to carry memory, and to be responsible for what they recall and how they tell it. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of action makes narrative more than a tool for understanding. It becomes a space where ethics and language meet. Through stories, identities are shaped, responsibilities are defined, and the world is reinterpreted. This dynamic view of interpretation refuses both rigid certainty and empty relativism. It holds that meaning emerges in dialogue, that truth happens over time, and that ethical life depends on how people tell, hear, and refigure the stories that bind them.

Language of hermeneutics

Rod Coltman[485] explores the ongoing conversation between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, focusing on how their views on language and understanding shape the course of modern philosophical hermeneutics. He begins by observing how contemporary thinkers often label themselves as 'postmodern' or 'postmetaphysical' to distance their ideas from the systematic traditions of the past. Yet, this distancing is not as clean as it seems. These labels still carry with them the very assumptions they aim to escape. Even as postmodernism criticises metaphysics, it remains tied to its language and concerns. Coltman contrasts this tendency with Gadamer's approach, which does not try to escape the past but instead enters a dialogue with it. Rather than dismantling tradition, Gadamer attempts to retrieve what remains valuable in it. He does not accept inherited truths uncritically, but he also refuses to treat them as obsolete. In doing so, he offers an alternative to the endless deferral of meaning often found in deconstructive philosophy. Interpretation, for Gadamer, involves risk. It demands that one bring their perspective into contact with the text, fully aware that any understanding is partial, shaped by historical conditions, and open to revision. This is where Gadamer diverges from Heidegger. While Heidegger breaks from metaphysics and turns toward poetry and silence, Gadamer keeps speaking with the tradition, especially with Plato and Hegel. He interprets participation not as submission to fixed forms, but as a living act—one where meaning is shaped through a dialogical process. For him, the dialectic of question and answer is not just a method but the basic mode of being in the world. Truth emerges in conversation, not in isolation or through the application of rigid logic. Coltman describes this relationship as a 'counterturning'. Heidegger moves away from metaphysical language toward poetic topology, while Gadamer turns back toward philosophical dialogue. Yet this movement is not oppositional—it is complementary. Heidegger dismantles, Gadamer retrieves. Heidegger turns inward, Gadamer opens outward. Their approaches are different, but they remain connected in their concern for how language reveals being. Coltman suggests that the irony in their relationship is not a contradiction but a productive tension. It shows how thought can move in opposite directions and still arrive at

[485] Coltman, R. (2004) The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

similar insights. Irony, in this sense, becomes ontological—a condition of thought itself. It reflects the need to think beyond binaries, to accept ambiguity, and to stay open to meaning as it emerges in real time. Gadamer's work offers a way to remain faithful to the philosophical tradition while also challenging it, showing that understanding is always unfinished, always a response to something that speaks. This vision of hermeneutics as a living dialogue challenges both dogmatism and scepticism. It invites thinkers to take interpretive risks, to speak with the past rather than about it, and to see language not as a tool but as a space where truth unfolds.

Hermeneutics and literary theory

Joel Weinsheimer[486] explores how philosophical hermeneutics, especially the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, reshapes literary theory. Instead of treating interpretation as a technical task guided by fixed rules, hermeneutics sees understanding as a historical process, unfolding through dialogue and experience. Weinsheimer makes it clear that this approach does not begin or end with Gadamer, but that his work plays a central role in moving the discussion away from method and toward deeper philosophical reflection. Earlier hermeneutics, like Schleiermacher's, focused on reconstructing the author's intention or establishing guidelines for accurate interpretation. Gadamer shifts this concern. For him, understanding is not about reconstructing the past exactly as it was, but about how the past and present interact. Understanding is not a mechanical operation but an event, shaped by tradition, history, and the openness of the interpreter. The past is not static; it speaks differently depending on the horizon of the reader. What is understood depends on when and by whom it is understood. One of Gadamer's important contributions is the idea of 'fusion of horizons'. This refers to the meeting point between the world of the text and the perspective of the reader. This fusion does not eliminate difference; rather, it works through it. Interpretation becomes a way to negotiate between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. Weinsheimer compares this to metaphor, where the familiar tenor and the unfamiliar vehicle combine to generate new meaning. Language, in this view, is not neutral or transparent. It is the very place where meaning is created, not merely transmitted. Gadamer also challenges the conventional understanding of language as a system of arbitrary signs, as proposed by Saussure. For Gadamer, language is more than a code. It functions like an image—something that carries its own meaning within itself. This contrasts with the instrumental model of language, where words are merely tools to point at things. Instead, Gadamer sees a word as something that brings the world into presence. This approach pushes against the dominance of semiotics and structuralism in literary theory, offering an alternative that emphasises the living, historical, and dialogical nature of language. Weinsheimer also reflects on the tension between correctness and creativity in interpretation. An interpretation must be tied to the original text to be meaningful, but it must also introduce something new to avoid repetition. This balance resists both rigid objectivity and pure relativism. It acknowledges that texts endure over time precisely because they allow for multiple, evolving interpretations. Gadamer's hermeneutics makes room for tradition without turning it into dogma, and it invites creative engagement without losing touch with the past. In sum, philosophical hermeneutics offers a richer understanding of literary theory by shifting focus from rules and authorial intent to dialogue, tradition, and the transformative power of language. It sees interpretation as a process of meaning-making grounded in historical experience and shaped by the active engagement between text and reader.

[486] Weinsheimer, J. (2010) 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory', in Malpas, J. and Gander, H. (eds) The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics. London: Routledge.

Language as hermeneutic

Walter J. Ong's reflections on language[487] and digitisation reveal a deep concern for how meaning is made in an age increasingly shaped by electronic media. In his final work, Ong explores the relationship between language and technology, arguing that all forms of verbal communication—oral, written, printed, or digital—require interpretation. He presents language not as a neutral tool for conveying facts, but as a medium that always demands understanding. Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, is therefore not a specialised discipline but a condition of human speech. Digitisation, Ong suggests, divides knowledge into discrete units. Computers, unlike humans, operate in binary code, reducing meaning to structure and precision. But this efficiency comes at a cost. Digital systems lack the nuance, ambiguity, and emotion that define human speech. Ong insists that total explicitness in language is impossible. Every utterance point beyond itself, calling for interpretation that can never be final. Meaning lives not in fixed data but in the space between what is said and what remains unsaid. Drawing on his earlier work in 'Orality and Literacy', Ong traces how communication has evolved across media. He introduces the concept of 'secondary orality', a new kind of speech arising from electronic culture—present in radio, television, and digital media. Unlike the original oral cultures, which lacked writing altogether, secondary orality is shaped by literacy but functions in spoken form. This fusion of the oral and the literate creates a fresh terrain for hermeneutics. Interpretation becomes more complex, but also more necessary, as speech and writing blend in new ways. For Ong, even the genetic code can be seen as a kind of language—structured, yes, but ultimately in need of interpretation. This parallels his view that technological media do not replace human speech but extend its interpretive burden. As texts and data accumulate, the need to interpret grows. Meaning is not embedded in systems but emerges through the human capacity to reflect, compare, and contextualise. Ong also critiques the illusion of permanence in written language. While writing gives a sense of stability, it can never capture the presence of spoken interaction. True presence, he argues, is achieved in the immediacy of face-to-face exchange, where tone, gesture, and bodily cues carry meaning. Martin Buber's notion of the 'I-thou' relationship serves as a model for this kind of dialogue, contrasting with the 'I-it' structure of impersonal data systems. Gadamer's textual hermeneutics, while valuable, must be extended to include the lived, reciprocal nature of oral communication. Ong calls for a renewed understanding of language—one that resists reduction to technical systems. Interpretation is not optional. It is built into every word. In a world flooded with digital information, humans must reclaim the hermeneutic role that only language can perform. Meaning is not given. It is made, and remade, through the act of understanding.

Hermeneutics beyond the text

Language has always carried more than its visible marks or audible sounds. While writing has fundamentally shaped the way humans preserve and transmit meaning, hermeneutics reminds us that interpretation occurs across all forms of communication. Gadamer, in 'Truth and Method', argues that language gains permanence and depth through writing. Paul Ricoeur likewise views writing as the fullest realisation of discourse. These perspectives reflect a strong textual bias rooted in Western thought. Writing's evolution—from pictographic cuneiform to the fully vocalised Greek alphabet—reveals how speech and script have continually shaped each other. Letters, though meaningless in isolation, produce meaning when combined, mirroring how spoken sounds function in all languages. Yet for most of human history,

[487] Ong, W. J. (2017) Language as Hermeneutic: A Primer on the Word and Digitization. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

language was not written. Oral traditions shaped societies long before texts existed. Writing introduced powerful new possibilities—standardisation, reproducibility, and the emergence of new forms of speech in media like radio and print. But these gains came with a cost. Writing freezes speech. It breaks the natural flow of language into fragments. Live conversation, rich with gesture and tone, cannot be fully replicated in static symbols. Hermeneutics began as the interpretation of sacred and literary texts, but its reach has broadened. It now includes oral language, gestures, rituals, and even social behaviour. Its task is to make the hidden visible, to show how meaning emerges from interaction. As Ferdinand de Saussure showed, language functions through differences—letters or sounds that gain meaning only within a system. Writing emphasises this structural quality by isolating and arranging signs visually. Thinkers such as Jacques Derrida have expanded the notion of 'text' beyond the page. For Derrida, all human interaction is textual—a field of signs, systems, and forces in constant motion. Paul Zumthor, however, cautions against reducing language to marks or scripts. He argues that the voice, especially in song, expresses dimensions of meaning that escape the limitations of writing. Meaning also depends on what is not said. Language always points beyond itself. In purely oral cultures, speech draws directly on the context—on the moment, the gesture, the shared background between speaker and listener. Interpretation arises from what is missing as much as from what is spoken. Even the act of naming in these settings requires mutual recognition and shared presence. Philosophers like Gadamer and Plato stress that understanding grows from dialogue, not isolated statements. Dialogue, grounded in trust, creates the space where meaning unfolds. In oral societies, language is performative. It is not a tool for transmitting facts but a shared action. Speech is intertwined with identity, place, and emotion. Studies in cultures from the Caribbean to South America show that talking is often communal, expressive, and overlapping. The goal is not clarity or structure but connection. Writing separates the speaker from the listener. Oral speech joins them. Hermeneutics, then, must not be limited to the interpretation of texts. It must also include the living moment, the face-to-face, and the unsaid. Understanding language means engaging not just with symbols, but with the people who use them.

Logos and digitisation

In 'Language as Hermeneutic', Walter J. Ong traces the development of human thought and communication through the evolving relationship between logos and digitisation. The term logos, often translated as 'word', has ancient roots in the Greek and Indo-European traditions. Originally drawn from the root leg-, meaning to pick up, gather, and arrange, logos carries spatial and tactile associations. It reflects the human impulse to organise experience. While mythos referred to stories and oral traditions, logos developed as a way of structuring meaning in more analytical and abstract forms. Ong argues that this movement from mythos to logos laid the groundwork for digitisation. The introduction of the Greek alphabet, especially its use of vowels, allowed speech to be rendered with a clarity and structure previously unseen. This innovation enabled the separation of speech from its oral context and gave rise to a new form of reasoning. As logos became more systematised, it gave rise to logic, computation, and the binary methods used in print and digital media. The work of thinkers like Peter Ramus, who formalised logic using printed outlines, foreshadowed modern computer processes. These methods break down thought into parts, into binaries, much like today’s digital systems. Modern computers push this logic to its extreme. They operate entirely through binary digits—ones and zeros. Everything, from text to images, is encoded into discrete units. While this allows for extraordinary efficiency and precision, it also erases the nuances that human speech, gesture, and presence provide. Computers fragment reality into countable pieces. They process

information, but they do not understand it. Meaning, for Ong, arises not from mechanical order but from human interpretation—an interpretive act grounded in context, dialogue, and shared experience. The shift from oral cultures to literate, printed, and now digitised societies has intensified the need for hermeneutics. Each technological stage enhances our ability to store and manipulate language but also increases the distance between humans and their speech. Oral language is immediate, relational, and full of redundancy and rhythm that aid memory and interaction. Writing and print formalise and fix language. Digital systems go further by disembedding meaning from lived experience, reducing it to pure data. Despite these transformations, Ong insists that all language remains hermeneutic. Even in a digital world, people must interpret what machines present. Information is not knowledge unless understood in context. The binary systems of computers reflect a historical logic rooted in logos, but human understanding exceeds such systems. It draws from mythos, emotion, embodiment, and social exchange—qualities that no digital process can replicate. Ong's perspective offers a warning and a hope. As technologies grow more powerful, the risk of losing touch with the human elements of communication increases. But the capacity for interpretation, rooted in the human voice and shared meaning, continues to resist reduction.

Boundaries of language

Hans-Georg Gadamer[488] reflects on the limits and possibilities of language by returning to the foundational role it plays in human understanding. Language, for Gadamer, is not simply a tool for conveying meaning, nor merely a set of grammatical structures. It is the medium through which the world becomes intelligible. Drawing on Aristotle, he emphasises hearing rather than since the sense most aligned with the universality of language. While vision separates and categorises, hearing unites—allowing one to participate in the unfolding of meaning. This listening is the basis of dialogue, where meaning arises not in isolation but between speakers who respond to each other. Gadamer argues that writing introduces a distance between language and the lived moment. In speech, people are bound together in a shared temporality. Writing, by contrast, freezes language, removes it from the immediacy of the encounter, and turns it into an object. This shift marks a self-imposed boundary. But the boundary is not a flaw; rather, it reveals something essential about language itself—its reliance on situation, on presence, on shared context. Language is never complete, and its meanings are never final. Each expression is an attempt to articulate what can never be fully said. Language also unfolds in ritual. Whether in religious liturgy, legal proceedings, or everyday customs, language is embedded in collective actions that give it rhythm and depth. These rituals are not reducible to information transfer. They bind people through repetition and form, shaping understanding in ways that escape direct articulation. Gadamer sees this as a counter to the analytic reduction of language into fixed units. Meaning is found not in isolating words but in participating in the flow of conversation and tradition. Even nonverbal expressions like laughter participate in this dynamic. Laughter is not outside language; it marks a moment of self-awareness, a distancing from one's own speech, and a signal of the playful emergence of meaning. This aligns with how children acquire language—not by rote learning but through active, creative engagement with their surroundings. They sense structures, generate patterns, and make mistakes that reveal their grasp of deeper rules. Gadamer's hermeneutics insists that language is dialogical. It is shaped by the back-and-forth of speaking and listening, by the tension between the said and the unsaid. Language contains within it the silence of what cannot

[488] Gadamer, H.-G. (1985) 'Boundaries of Language', in Schmidt, L. K. (ed.) Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics. Albany: State University of New York Press.

be spoken, and this silence is not absence but potential. In every effort to name, something escapes. The right word is always sought but never quite reached.

Hermeneutics and the human sciences

Paul Ricoeur's essays in 'Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences[489]' explore how written texts change the nature of discourse and reshape the process of interpretation. Once speech is fixed in writing, it detaches from its author, context, and intended listener. The written word becomes autonomous. It no longer unfolds in the shared space of conversation but stands alone, awaiting interpretation. This distance introduces a new hermeneutical task: to understand meaning without relying on the speaker's presence or immediate intention. Reading is no longer a matter of grasping what someone meant to say but of uncovering what the text now says. Ricoeur builds on Wilhelm Dilthey's distinction between explanation and understanding. Explanation seeks causal or structural analysis, following the model of the natural sciences. Understanding, by contrast, aims at grasping the lived meaning behind human expressions. But for Ricoeur, this contrast is too rigid. Once speech becomes text, interpretation cannot be limited to psychological empathy or pure subjectivity. The structure of the text must be accounted for. This leads to a richer model that includes both approaches: a structural explanation of the text's internal logic and a phenomenological engagement with its world of meaning. Ricoeur argues that texts can be analysed structurally, much like myths in Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropology. Just as myths are composed of repeated units called mythemes, texts consist of structured elements—phrases, themes, oppositions—that relate in patterned ways. These structures do not depend on the author's intent. They belong to the text itself. Through such analysis, one can uncover a text's latent grammar and its underlying narrative rules. This explanatory reading does not seek to revive a past speech act but to map out the internal relationships that give the text coherence. However, Ricoeur does not stop there. He insists that true interpretation also reactivates the text's world. A reader engages the text not as a closed object but as an invitation to reimagine meaning. Reading becomes a dynamic event in which the text's suspended meaning is brought into the present. Here, the structural analysis supports interpretation, grounding it in form, but interpretation carries it further—into appropriation and renewed significance. This model also applies to metaphor. In his essay on metaphor, Ricoeur explains how a word gains new meaning by disrupting its ordinary use. Metaphor operates within a sentence, forcing the clash of literal meanings to produce a novel sense. This process mirrors how a reader engages a text: both involve tensions between fixed forms and emergent meaning. Both challenge the boundary between explanation and understanding. Ricoeur proposes that explanation and interpretation are not opposing methods but complementary stages of the hermeneutical process. A structural account outlines the text's form; interpretation reanimates it. Meaning arises between these two poles—through structure and lived experience. Texts, like metaphors, speak beyond their form. They point toward a world and ask readers to meet them there.

1.3. Typology

(Echoes and archetypes: The literary afterlife of typological thought)

'The type is not a copy but a figure—history shaped to resemble destiny'.

[489] Ricoeur, P. (1981) Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

— Thomas R. Preston, From Typology to Literature

'The past is seen not as merely precedent but as prophecy'.

— Northrop Frye, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature

Typology

Typology emerged in early Christian thought to bridge the theological gap between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Although both texts were seen as sacred, certain Jewish practices—like dietary laws or circumcision—were no longer considered binding for Christians. To address this tension, early Church thinkers turned to typology, interpreting figures and events in the Old Testament as prefigurations of Christ. These 'types' were thought to find their true meaning or fulfilment in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul supported this in his letters, particularly in Colossians, and the author of Hebrews expanded on it, asserting that rituals of the old covenant were mere shadows of the new. This form of interpretation was strongly influenced by Alexandrian thinkers, especially Philo, who merged Jewish tradition with Greek philosophy. Philo treated scripture as allegory, drawing on Platonic ideas about eternal forms and hidden meanings. Early Christians such as Origen built upon this model, developing a theological system where biblical texts operated on multiple levels: literal, moral, and spiritual. Augustine later refined this view, arguing that while the Bible is historically accurate, its deeper spiritual meaning lies in its prophetic structure. He famously contrasted the 'letter' that kills with the 'spirit' that gives life. Over time, figures like Isidore of Seville and Rabanus Maurus codified these interpretations, turning typology into a consistent exegetical practice. Meanwhile, in Jewish traditions, parallel approaches were developing in Rabbinic literature and Kabbalistic texts, including the Pardes model for multi-layered interpretation. Typological thinking extended beyond theology into visual and literary art. Medieval cathedrals displayed scenes that juxtaposed Old Testament stories with New Testament parallels. Works like the Speculum Humanae Salvationis and the Biblia pauperum were widely circulated, visually mapping how figures such as Jonah, Moses, or David symbolically prefigured Christ. These images reinforced religious teachings for an illiterate population and were central to the aesthetics of Christian art. Erich Auerbach, in his essay 'Figura', observed that typology stood alongside other interpretive modes like allegory and myth, but became the dominant framework in Christian Europe. This figural method not only shaped medieval literature and art but persisted into later centuries. The Puritans, for example, used typology to frame their own history. They saw themselves as modern Israelites, their journey across the Atlantic a second Exodus, their settlement in New England a New Zion. Writers like Edward Johnson infused this idea into early colonial narratives, interpreting American experience as sacred history, echoing biblical archetypes. Georg Stöckhardt later distinguished between 'intrinsic' typology—meanings intended by the original text—and 'extrinsic' typology—interpretations applied by later readers. While Stöckhardt rejected the intrinsic kind to safeguard scriptural clarity, later scholarship often accepts both. In narrative criticism, scholars like Mark Allan Powell suggest that typology introduces symbolic dimensions into a story, distinguishing between the narrative’s chronological order and its symbolic 'typological' time. Typology, then, is not just a method of interpretation but a symbolic framework that shapes how believers relate past, present, and future. It interprets history through patterns of divine repetition and fulfilment, making theology itself a narrative of echoes.

From typology to literature

In 'From Typology to Literature: Hermeneutics and Historical Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England[490]', Thomas R. Preston explores how biblical interpretative practices shaped the evolution of historical writing and literature in the eighteenth century. Drawing on Hayden White's theory that historical narratives are forms of 'verbal fictions', Preston notes that not all such narratives become literary. What transforms history into literature is not just the use of language or invention, but the ability to elevate facts into something resonant and universal. Ralph Rader's analysis of Boswell's 'Life of Johnson' supports this, showing how the narrative artfully selects and evaluates events to present Johnson's character in an idealised, exemplary way. Preston argues that writers like Boswell, Hume, Gibbon, and Johnson worked within an intellectual tradition that saw history not merely as a report of events but as a literary art. These authors composed historical texts that bore resemblance to epic poetry. David Hume, for instance, likened the structure of history to that of the epic, where unity of action was crucial. In the same period, the novel was also emerging as a kind of modern epic, drawing from daily life to build narratives with emotional and moral depth. A key influence on this literary approach to history came from biblical hermeneutics, particularly typology. Typology originally referred to the interpretation of Old Testament figures as prefigurations of New Testament events. Over time, Christian thinkers shifted its meaning from mere prophecy to a more general concept of recurring moral and behavioural patterns. A type was no longer simply a symbolic foreshadowing; it became a template of character traits, a way of predicting conduct. This shift laid the foundation for its use in literature, where biblical figures became models for fictional and historical characters. One example Preston gives is the figure of Nimrod, the obscure biblical king who was interpreted by later commentators as a paradigm of tyranny. Writers such as Humphrey Prideaux and Samuel Shuckford elaborated Nimrod's image as a despotic ruler, turning a vague scriptural reference into a full moral archetype. This archetype then found its way into eighteenth-century literature and history. In novels like Tobias Smollett's 'Humphry Clinker' or Fielding's 'Joseph Andrews', authors used references to Nimrod to frame characters as tyrannical or overbearing. These allusions worked not through direct comparison but through a cultural understanding of types that guided readers' expectations. This typological method also informed how religious and secular historians explained miraculous or morally ambiguous events. In retelling biblical stories, writers like Thomas Stackhouse introduced moral footnotes and rationalised divine interventions, making them seem plausible to an eighteenth-century audience. Even David Hume, though sceptical of religion, drew on biblical types in shaping his account of Oliver Cromwell. Hume depicted Cromwell as a kind of modern Nimrod, but he did not reduce him to the type. Instead, he combined the typological model with historical complexity, acknowledging external circumstances and the influence of others. Preston shows how this method of exemplary reading—using analogies and patterns to frame human behaviour—extended from theology into secular writing. Through typology, authors shaped narrative expectations, using the past as a guide to understanding the present. The influence was not limited to character construction; it also shaped narrative structure. The retelling of historical events was no longer a neutral act. It became a literary endeavour, aiming to convey meaning, continuity, and moral insight through the repetition of recognisable types. This development parallels the broader evolution of language into narrative. Just as typology allowed theologians to connect disparate events through moral or spiritual resonance, narrative language developed the capacity to unify facts

[490] Preston, T. R. (1995) From Typology to Literature: Hermeneutics and Historical Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England. University of Missouri Press.

into meaningful patterns. The repeated use of character types, narrative arcs, and symbolic motifs helped create a shared framework for storytelling. Theological typology thus became a seedbed for narrative form, influencing both how language was used and how stories were told. The novel benefited from this tradition. Authors shaped characters not merely as individuals but as representatives of broader types—heroes, tyrants, fools, or saints—just as biblical figures had been interpreted. The stories they told were anchored in social and moral concerns but made legible through these inherited structures. In this way, typology did not only explain sacred texts but also shaped secular literature and the historical imagination. Preston concludes that eighteenth-century historical writing and fiction achieved their literary power by adopting typological and hermeneutic strategies. These methods allowed writers to craft narratives that were not just records of what happened, but interpretations of what events meant. They turned the raw material of history into forms that echoed moral universals. Language was transformed into story, and linked the past to enduring patterns of human behaviour.

Anagoge and its interpretative role

Anagoge, from the Greek meaning ascent or spiritual elevation, is one of the four classical methods of interpreting scripture in the medieval Christian tradition. Alongside the literal, allegorical, and moral readings, the anagogical method directs the interpreter's attention beyond earthly concerns toward the heavenly. While the literal refers to historical events, the allegorical prefigures Christ, and the tropological provides moral instruction, the anagogical points upward, revealing hidden meanings about the soul's ultimate destiny. This mode of interpretation became especially significant during the Middle Ages, when theology and metaphysics merged with literary and poetic forms. Hugh of Saint Victor described anagoge not as a simple allegory, but as a reasoning upward—from visible realities to their spiritual causes. In his treatise 'De scripturis et scriptoribus sacris', Hugh outlined this distinction clearly. Allegory might link the crossing of the Red Sea to Christ's resurrection, but anagoge would take that event further, toward the promise of eternal life. It is not merely symbolic, but eschatological in its direction. Dante Alighieri famously embraced the fourfold method in his 'Divine Comedy'. In a letter to his patron Can Grande, Dante explained that his poem could be read on several levels—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. The ascent of the pilgrim from the dark wood through Hell and Purgatory into Paradise serves not just as a moral journey, but as a symbolic ascent of the soul to divine understanding. The poem's structure itself embodies anagogical logic: it is a journey not merely through narrative spaces, but through layers of being. The power of anagoge lies in its capacity to move beyond representation. It is not interested in the world as it is, or even as it should be, but as it might be understood through divine revelation. Unlike allegory, which often remains bound to historical events and figures, anagoge opens a horizon where those events are signs of eternal truths. It demands a kind of faith in language's capacity to carry meanings that exceed the literal and moral realms. Anagoge also serves as a counterpoint to more rationalist and historicist approaches. Where those might seek coherence in scripture by aligning it with archaeology or social context, anagoge assumes that meaning comes from above, not from below. It works not by deduction, but by orientation—turning the reader's vision heavenward. The act of interpretation itself becomes a spiritual discipline, not just an intellectual exercise. Though less prominent in contemporary hermeneutics, anagoge remains essential for understanding how medieval thinkers approached texts. It signals a worldview in which language, narrative, and experience are all layered and infused with transcendental significance. In this interpretive model, scripture is not exhausted by its surface; it conceals within it a path toward salvation.

Hyperdiffusionism

Hyperdiffusionism is a controversial and widely rejected theory that claims most or all cultural and technological achievements across ancient civilisations originated from a single, advanced source. It suggests that similarities between distant societies—such as pyramid building in Egypt and Mesoamerica—are not coincidental or the result of parallel development, but stem from one common origin. Unlike traditional diffusionism, which emphasises gradual exchange of ideas through contact, hyperdiffusionism pushes a monogenetic model of cultural history. This theory often relies on weak analogies and overlooks the complex, independent development of human societies. Instead of acknowledging that different groups can solve similar problems in similar ways, hyperdiffusionism attributes all innovation to a single lost civilisation. Egypt, Atlantis, Lemuria, and even ancient aliens have all been proposed as this civilisational source. For example, the claim that ancient Egyptians travelled to the Americas to build pyramids reflects this thinking. Such ideas are difficult to test and rarely supported by archaeological evidence. They typically rest on visual resemblances and speculative narratives rather than verifiable data. One of the best-known examples involves the Tucson artefacts, objects allegedly discovered in Arizona that resemble Roman relics. Hyperdiffusionists claimed these were evidence that Romans had made transatlantic journeys. Scholars, however, pointed out major inconsistencies, including stylistic anomalies and the absence of a supporting archaeological context. Similarly, proponents of hyperdiffusionism have claimed that cultural traits like writing systems, astronomy, and metalworking in the Americas, Africa, or Asia must have come from a single 'mother' civilisation. This not only ignores the agency of indigenous peoples but also risks endorsing a Eurocentric or colonial narrative by portraying non-European cultures as incapable of independent development. In contrast, mainstream anthropologists and archaeologists favour a model of trans-cultural diffusion. This approach acknowledges that ideas and technologies spread through trade, migration, and long-term contact networks. Cultural similarities can emerge through shared human experiences, environmental constraints, and the inherent creativity of societies. Independent invention and convergent evolution are well-documented phenomena that do not require a hyperdiffusionist explanation. Hyperdiffusionism often serves as a modern myth rather than a scientific hypothesis. It appeals to those fascinated by lost continents, ancient mysteries, and conspiracies about forgotten knowledge. However, its methodological flaws make it more a matter of belief than evidence-based inquiry. The theory tends to disregard local contexts and historical complexity in favour of sweeping generalisations. By collapsing the diversity of cultural histories into a single origin story, hyperdiffusionism undermines the richness of human innovation. It simplifies the past into a linear narrative driven by a mythical progenitor, rather than recognising the multiple pathways through which civilisations evolve.

The modes of modern writing

In 'The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature[491]', David Lodge explores how modern literature operates through complex interactions between linguistic structure and reader response. The difficulty of defining literature is his starting point. While some traditions emphasise fictionality—literature as language freed from the obligation of truth—others highlight its aesthetic dimension, the way it draws attention to itself as language. Lodge argues that neither perspective is enough on its own, but together they help explain the unique quality of literary discourse. Central to Lodge's

[491] Lodge, D. (1977) The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature. London: Edward Arnold.

approach is the idea of 'foregrounding', a concept developed by the Czech structuralists, particularly Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson. Foregrounding describes the deliberate deviation from ordinary language to create artistic effects. It depends on contrast—an aesthetic pattern set against a familiar background of linguistic norms. A poem by T. S. Eliot, for instance, stands out not just because it is poetry but because it departs from both traditional poetic norms and common speech, producing a distinctive modernist tension. This structuralist view implies that literature gains much of its force from its form. However, critics like Ruqaiya Hasan suggest that literary meaning lies not only in linguistic form but also in thematic unity. Yet this position runs into trouble when one considers works such as essays or biographies that are treated as literature without relying on metaphor or symbol. Lodge instead proposes a more flexible notion: literature is a form of discourse that invites a special kind of attention, a reading 'as if' the text was fictional or constructed with aesthetic intent. Jakobson's model of communication helps clarify this. While everyday language focuses on transmitting information, literary language draws attention to its own structure. The message becomes the message. This shift in focus accounts for how some non-literary texts, such as scientific writing or historical narrative, can become literary if read in a certain way. Conversely, some texts are recognised as literary regardless of their content because they belong to a literary tradition. The dynamic between writing and reading is essential. Literature is not just a static category of texts; it is a relationship between the form of the text and how readers approach it. Readers play an active role in interpreting structure, tone, and aesthetic choices. This makes literature a flexible and evolving category, shaped by cultural habits and interpretative expectations. As Lodge emphasises, fictionality and aesthetic awareness are not fixed properties, but effects generated through this reader-text interaction. A major part of Lodge's argument builds on Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor operates through substitution based on similarity, while metonymy connects elements that are already contextually linked. In practice, most literary works use both modes. Realist fiction leans toward metonymy, grounding meaning in the detail of everyday life. Metaphor, on the other hand, introduces poetic resonance, but if used excessively it can break the illusion of reality. Writers must therefore manage a balance: controlling metaphor so it enriches without overwhelming the text's internal coherence. Lodge's typology shows how modern literature reflects the tension between these two modes. Writers like Wordsworth favour context-bound, metonymic language, while modernists like Eliot use metaphoric dislocation to fracture conventional meanings. In each case, literary value arises from the play between linguistic form and readerly interpretation. Literature is not just about what is said, but how it is said—and how it is read.

Sacred language, sacred world

Joshua D. Broggi's study 'Sacred Language, Sacred World: The Unity of Scriptural and Philosophical Hermeneutics[492]' invites readers to reconsider the relationship between scripture, tradition, and reason not as three separate pillars of theology, but as expressions of a single, unified experience. He begins with the Kimbanguists, a Christian movement from the Belgian Congo, whose reinterpretation of the Bible placed an African prophet, Simon Kimbangu, at the centre of divine revelation. For colonial authorities and Western missionaries, this was heresy. For the local community, it was a living truth. The Bible, removed from its European context and received in a different world, produced a new theology and a new community. This story becomes more than a narrative about religious difference—it becomes a case study in

[492] Broggi, J. D. (2015) Sacred Language, Sacred World: The Unity of Scriptural and Philosophical Hermeneutics. Oxford: Peter Lang.

hermeneutics. It shows how the meaning of a sacred text depends not just on what it says, but on where and how it is read. Broggi argues that debates about scripture inevitably reveal assumptions about the world. When theologians ask whether a passage means one thing or another, they are also asking about the kind of world in which that meaning makes sense. In different contexts, the same text gives rise to different interpretations, not due to misreading, but because each community inhabits a different interpretive world. The theologian's task is not to choose between interpretations, but to ask how those interpretations are formed. This move transforms theology into an inquiry into the structure of lived experience. Martin Heidegger, whose early lectures influenced both theologians and philosophers, insisted on keeping theology and philosophy apart. He classified theology as a 'positive science', bound to specific doctrinal commitments, while philosophy, he argued, could ask deeper questions about the conditions for meaning. But Broggi challenges this divide. If both theology and philosophy emerge from the same human background—the same language, the same teleologies, the same social patterns—then their separation seems artificial. Theological statements, like philosophical ones, are embedded in a world that gives them sense. Heidegger himself recognised this when reading Paul's epistles, noting how eschatological anticipation structures the Christian experience of time. This insight, Broggi claims, should lead not to a split between theology and philosophy, but to their unification. Language plays a central role in this argument. It is not a neutral code for expressing ideas, but a form of life that brings worlds into being. For Broggi, sacred language is world-shaping. The meaning of religious terms, rites, and doctrines depends on the world in which they are practiced. A liturgical phrase or a scriptural verse carries different weight in Rome, Lagos, or Kinshasa. These differences are not just cultural—they are ontological. They show how scripture, tradition, and reason cannot be disentangled from the lives that interpret them. The theological implications are clear. Interpreting scripture is not simply about recovering original meaning or adhering to orthodox tradition. It is about seeing how these acts of interpretation organise the world. When one community sees an icon and another sees an idol, the object has not changed—only the world in which it appears. Sacred language reveals this world, and the work of theology is to study its structure, its history, and its consequences. Broggi's proposal is not to dissolve doctrine into relativism but to recognise that theological meaning arises within a shared but evolving world. This view makes room for pluralism without giving up the search for truth. It asks theologians to remain aware of the background assumptions that shape their interpretations and to acknowledge the role of narrative, ritual, and community in giving sacred texts their life.

No escape from ideology

In 'Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences', Paul Ricoeur revisits the complex relationship between science and ideology. He begins with a reminder from Aristotle: precision in knowledge depends on the nature of the subject. In politics and ethics, where things are fluid and contingent, one should not expect the same level of exactness found in mathematics or the natural sciences. This ancient insight frames the rest of the inquiry. Ricoeur does not treat ideology as mere distortion or illusion. Instead, he explores its function as a symbolic mechanism that social groups use to represent and sustain themselves. A key mistake, Ricoeur argues, is defining ideology only in terms of social class, a view shaped by Marxist traditions. Another danger is reducing it to the justification of domination. Both views, while not entirely false, oversimplify ideology. It is not just about power or deception. It also performs a constructive role. Through rituals, symbols, and foundational myths, communities give meaning to their existence. Revolutions, charters, and constitutions are not frozen moments. They are reinterpreted across time, woven into narratives that hold societies together. Drawing

on Max Weber's theory of social action, Ricoeur describes ideology as a group's effort to produce an image of itself. This image is never neutral. It reduces complexity, organises memory, and motivates action. It works through slogans, doctrines, and simplified codes. Liberalism, socialism, nationalism—all are forms of ideological shorthand. Such systems are inherently rhetorical. They persuade, conceal, and create a sense of certainty. But over time, they can become rigid, blind to the realities they once sought to represent. This is ideology's paradox: it opens the world by creating meaning, then closes it by reducing that meaning to a fixed scheme. Marx's idea of ideology as inversion—a distortion akin to the camera obscura—is central to this analysis. For Marx, ideology flips reality, hiding the true nature of economic relations. Ricoeur extends this metaphor to modern science and technology. Even scientific knowledge, he argues, is not immune to ideological distortion. In capitalist societies, science can become a servant of the system, used not to question but to confirm existing structures. This shows that ideology is not tied to content. It is a function of how symbols organise experience. Ricoeur then questions the possibility of a non-ideological social science. Can the study of society be neutral? He is sceptical. The methods of the natural sciences—based on verification, falsification, and prediction—do not easily apply to human action. Social theories are always embedded in the very world they seek to describe. Even critical theories, which claim to unmask ideology, risk becoming ideological themselves when they harden into dogma. In the end, Ricoeur offers no escape from ideology. But he does not see this as defeat. Rather, he calls for a reflective practice that acknowledges its own limitations. The task is not to eliminate ideology but to understand how it works and how it shapes both science and society.

2. MISCOMMUNICATION

2.2. Mass miscommunication

(When everyone speaks: Broadcasting noise, losing meaning)

'Communication fails not in spite of language, but because of it'.

— Niklas Luhmann, Social Systems

'Misunderstanding is not the failure of communication—it is its fundamental mode'.

— John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air

The Babel effect

The Babel Effect: Miscommunication and the Breakdown of Symbolic Order in Mass Society. Miscommunication is typically understood as a breakdown in the transmission of meaning between speaker and listener. One speaks poorly, the other listens badly, and clarity is lost somewhere in the middle. Yet this definition, framed in purely functional terms, masks a more profound implication. Language is not simply a conduit of facts or intentions—it is the bond that makes society possible. When communication fails, what collapses is not just understanding but communion: the shared symbolic world that allows individuals to relate as members of a family, a community, or a society. The prefix 'mis' implies more than mistake; it

carries connotations of harm, deviation, and corruption. Miscommunication, then, is not merely faulty expression. It is corrupted communion. At its deepest level, it marks the disintegration of trust, the shattering of shared reality, and the erosion of symbolic coherence. It signals an illness in the social fabric, a breakdown of the ethical and emotional alignment necessary for communal life. This becomes particularly acute in large groups. As the number of participants in a communicative field grows, the distance between individuals increases. Personal relationships weaken, shared references dissolve, and the precision of communication gives way to generalisation. In smaller groups—families, tribes, close communities—language is sustained by intimacy and context. People speak to those they know, about things they understand together. But in larger societies, that common ground vanishes. Most information is taken on faith, accepted not because of understanding but because of trust in the source—or belief in its authority. When that trust erodes, language no longer serves as communion. It becomes either a weapon or a void. In mass society, language is easily distorted. The multiplication of voices does not automatically produce clarity. Instead, it creates noise. The speaker must appeal to abstract categories—'the people', 'the market', 'the nation'—rather than to named individuals. The listener, in turn, interprets from within their own social, ideological, or emotional bubble. The shared symbolic universe disintegrates into private worlds. Miscommunication here is not incidental—it is systemic. It arises because the structure of mass society favours detachment over connection, performance over dialogue. Sociologically, this resembles what Emile Durkheim called anomie: a state in which social norms break down and individuals become unmoored from communal meaning. The result is confusion, suspicion, and alienation. In such a landscape, language becomes a terrain of conflict rather than communion. Miscommunication grows in the space where no shared assumptions remain. Each utterance becomes ambiguous, each gesture suspect. The other is no longer a person to understand, but a code to decode—or a threat to avoid. This is compounded by the nature of public discourse in modernity. In large-scale communication—political speech, mass media, digital platforms—language loses its dialogical quality. It becomes declarative, repetitive, strategic. Truth becomes secondary to persuasion; meaning becomes subordinate to engagement. The rise of jargon, euphemism, slogan, and doublespeak reflects this shift. These forms do not aim at mutual understanding but at signal transmission. They are designed to be received, not responded to. Thus, communication no longer constitutes community. It mimics it. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard warned of the replacement of meaning by simulation in such societies. Miscommunication in this context is not a bug but a feature. It sustains systems in which symbolic exchange is hollowed out. Language becomes pure appearance—statements without commitments, questions without listeners, signs without referents. In such an environment, people speak more but understand less. They hear others' voices, but not their meanings. The symbolic link between words and shared life frays until speech becomes the echo of isolation. Psychologically, this fragmentation manifests in widespread feelings of alienation. Individuals feel unheard, misunderstood, and emotionally disconnected even amid constant communication. This is not merely a personal issue but a structural one. When language is no longer rooted in relationships of care, it becomes abstract. When speech becomes a performance for strangers, rather than a gesture toward connection, it ceases to carry meaning that binds. In extreme cases, miscommunication escalates into distrust and division. Misunderstanding becomes misjudgement; misjudgement becomes antagonism. A society that cannot speak to itself breaks into factions that no longer share even the assumption of good faith. Each group believes it is being misrepresented or ignored by the others. Dialogue gives way to monologue. Words cease to bridge and begin to divide. To address miscommunication, then, is not merely a matter of clearer language or better education. It requires a reweaving of the social and

symbolic fabric—an effort to restore the conditions under which language can again function as communion. This means rebuilding trust, cultivating attention, and fostering environments where people speak not only to be heard but to be understood. Without such efforts, large societies risk becoming crowds: assemblies without connection, networks without meaning.

Why we lie more easily in groups

People often think of teamwork as a path to shared success, but when it comes to honesty, teams can have the opposite effect. A recent study[493] 'Why We Lie More Easily in Teams' from Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich shows that people lie more frequently in group settings than when acting alone. Conducted by behavioural economists and published in 'Management Science', the study sheds light on how group dynamics can undermine personal ethics, especially in organisational and institutional contexts. In the experiment, 273 participants watched a die roll on video and then had to report the result. The higher the number they claimed, the more money they received. The catch was that the actual roll was private, so lying was easy and tempting. When people made decisions individually, about 61.5% lied. But when they discussed and voted on the result in anonymous group chats, the number of liars rose to 86.3%. As Martin Kocer, one of the researchers, noted, people are significantly less honest when they decide together. Why does this happen? In teams, individuals often shift responsibility. Instead of feeling personally accountable, they defer to group consensus. This diffusion of responsibility can create a sense that 'everyone is doing it', making unethical actions seem less blameworthy. Even those who would normally act honestly tend to go along with the group. Professor Julia E. Hoch from California State University Northridge points out that peer pressure plays a major role. If a team leans toward dishonesty, others feel pressure to conform, especially when group members reinterpret norms and values together. This kind of social drift has real consequences. Group dishonesty can scale up into widespread organisational misconduct. Historical events provide extreme examples, such as how entire populations became complicit in state-led violence or discrimination. On a more everyday level, the same logic helps explain why corporate scandals often involve many people—not just a single bad actor. The more a team's behaviour deviates from ethical standards, the more difficult it becomes for individuals to resist. In companies, this makes leadership and communication crucial. Without strong ethical norms, group decision-making can easily slide into collective dishonesty. The researchers recommend implementing and maintaining a strict code of conduct. Ethical standards should not be abstract statements, but regularly reinforced practices. Monitoring group interactions and encouraging dissent or whistleblowing are essential tools to prevent the erosion of honesty. The problem becomes worse in large or hierarchical teams. In such environments, authority figures can either reinforce ethical behaviour or indirectly encourage deception. If leaders turn a blind eye or set poor examples, those beneath them often follow. In the case of the Enron scandal, for instance, many employees suspected wrongdoing but did not speak up because of the company's internal culture and pressure from above. The study also resonates with broader research on communication challenges in virtual teams. Professor Hoch notes that in remote environments, where people interact mostly through email or video calls, ethical behaviour depends heavily on clear leadership and defined goals. Without physical presence, informal checks on behaviour are weaker, and team members may lose sight of shared values. Transparency and regular feedback become more important when social cues are limited. In the end, the findings point to a simple but troubling truth: group membership can make people more likely to abandon their principles. Left unchecked, team settings encourage

[493] Hoch, J.E. and Kocer, M. (2023) Why We Lie More Easily in Teams. Management Science.

a gradual redefinition of what counts as acceptable behaviour. What begins as a one-time compromise can quickly become the new norm. Organisations need to recognise this risk and take active steps to preserve individual accountability even in collective settings. As Kocer puts it, the path to ethical failure often starts not with bad people, but with good people in the wrong group context. In such situations, it is not individual conscience that guides action, but the group's shifting standards that determine what is considered right or wrong. Lying, in this sense, is an expected social activity.

Repairing trust

Restoring trust after a transgression is not a simple matter, and the dynamics shift depending on whether one is dealing with an individual or a group. In the study 'Repairing trust with individuals vs. groups[494]' by Peter H. Kim, Cecily D. Cooper, Kurt T. Dirks, and Donald L. Ferrin, the authors explore how trust repair processes differ between these two contexts. Their findings suggest that groups present more resistance to trust restoration than individuals, particularly when responses to violations do not align with the type of harm caused. Two types of violations are key to understanding this: competence-based and integrity-based. A competence-based violation occurs when someone fails due to a lack of skill or ability, while an integrity-based violation involves dishonesty or unethical behaviour. The study finds that if the transgressor denies responsibility for a competence-based failure, trust declines. Similarly, if someone apologises for an integrity-based breach, it can backfire. In both cases, the mismatch between the nature of the violation and the kind of response undermines the credibility of the repair effort. Groups, the researchers note, are more sensitive to these mismatches. When individuals assess trust violations alone, their judgments are more likely to be shaped by personal interpretation and emotional response. But when the same people enter a group setting, their views are exposed to reinforcement, challenge, and amplification. Shared opinions in the group can escalate negative assessments, making trust harder to restore. People are often swayed not just by the arguments they hear, but by the perception of what others in the group believe. Once a dominant opinion forms, dissent becomes less likely, and the group's stance tends to harden. The study also observes that the order in which evaluations occur matters. If individuals form their views before entering a group discussion, their opinions are more flexible. But once a group judgment is formed, it becomes a strong reference point for individuals. This anchoring effect means that group decisions tend to dominate later individual assessments, whereas individual views may still shift in group settings. One of the most revealing insights is the role of persuasive argumentation. It is not just the content of what is said that matters, but how effectively it resonates with shared group values. Normative pressure—trying to conform to what seems expected—is less effective than a compelling explanation that directly addresses the concerns raised by the violation. Successful trust repair depends on presenting a narrative that aligns clearly with the nature of the broken trust and that can withstand group scrutiny. The implications for organisations and leaders are significant. Misjudging the type of violation and responding inappropriately can deepen mistrust, especially when responses are perceived as generic or strategic. Efforts to repair trust should be tailored, deliberate, and grounded in an understanding of group psychology. Addressing individuals with

[494] Kim, P.H., Cooper, C.D., Dirks, K.T. and Ferrin, D.L. (2013). Repairing trust with individuals vs. groups. Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes, 120(1), pp.1–14. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2012.08.004.

sincerity and logic may work in one-on-one contexts, but repairing trust with groups requires anticipating how discussions will evolve and how opinions might converge or polarise.

Groups are less trusting than individuals

In many social and economic settings, trust is essential. Whether people interact in families, businesses, or governments, the ability to rely on others under conditions of uncertainty shapes relationships and decisions. Most previous research on trust focuses on individuals, yet many decisions in real life are made by groups. A study 'Trust between individuals and groups[495]' by Tamar Kugler and colleagues explores how groups behave differently from individuals in situations that require trust and trustworthiness, using a controlled experiment to highlight these differences. The researchers used a two-person trust game to test their ideas. In this game, a sender receives a sum of money and chooses how much to send to a responder. The amount sent is tripled, and the responder then decides how much to return to the sender. The experiment followed a two by two structure: both roles (sender and responder) were filled either by individuals or groups of three. Each group had to come to a joint decision, simulating the way real-life teams make choices. Results showed a clear difference in the level of trust between individuals and groups. Individuals in the sender role sent larger portions of the money to the responder than groups did. Groups were not only more cautious but also more likely to send nothing at all—especially when the responder was another group. This suggests that groups are more risk-averse and less willing to assume that the other party will reciprocate. In contrast, individuals appeared more comfortable placing their faith in the game's process and in the assumed goodwill of others. However, the study revealed that when it came to returning money—as responders—groups behaved similarly to individuals. That is, once they received the tripled amount, groups returned a comparable fraction to the sender. This consistency suggests that while groups may hesitate to trust, they are not less trustworthy. Their caution does not reflect a lower ethical standard, only a different approach to taking risks. In short, groups and individuals are equally reliable when acting in the role of the responder. The researchers also considered how groups and individuals behaved in asymmetric pairings—for example, a group sending to an individual or vice versa. The same trends held: groups acted more cautiously when they had to trust, but their reliability in returning funds was consistent with individual behaviour. These results suggest that group dynamics make people more conservative when initiating trust but do not alter their sense of fairness or reciprocity. This has important implications for how organisations and societies function. In real-world settings, many decisions are not made by isolated individuals but by committees, boards, or work teams. Understanding that groups tend to be less trusting—but not less trustworthy—can help in designing institutional frameworks that account for group psychology. It may also explain why negotiations or collaborative projects often take longer and require more formal guarantees when multiple stakeholders are involved. The study challenges the assumption that caution or reluctance to trust implies a lack of goodwill. Instead, it shows that trust and trustworthiness are distinct. One can be generous and reliable while still being slow to take a risk. Recognising this distinction can lead to more productive interactions, especially in situations where trust must be built across group boundaries. The study by Kugler, Bornstein, Kocher, and Sutter thus offers a nuanced picture of how trust functions in group settings. It shows that while groups are more hesitant to extend trust, they are no less dependable

[495] Kugler, T., Bornstein, G., Kocher, M.G. and Sutter, M. (2007) 'Trust between individuals and groups: Groups are less trusting than individuals but just as trustworthy', Journal of Economic Psychology, 28(6), pp. 646–657.

in honouring it once given. This difference may stem from the need for consensus in groups or the psychological effects of shared responsibility, but the outcome is clear: groups are more cautious, not more selfish.

Trusting groups

In his article 'Trusting Groups[496]', Matthew Bennett examines the idea that people can genuinely trust groups, not just rely on them. He challenges the scepticism raised by Katherine Hawley, who argues that groups cannot be proper objects of trust because they lack personal agency. According to Hawley, trusting a group is fundamentally different from trusting an individual, and what often passes as group trust is better described as reliance. Bennett engages with this critique and argues that a more nuanced understanding can preserve the concept of group trust. Bennett begins by explaining the debate. Many social science studies measure trust in institutions like governments, corporations, or media organisations. But if Hawley is right, and group trust is a mistake, then those studies might be misreading what they observe. Hawley draws a sharp line between trust and reliance. For individuals, trust implies a commitment and a willingness to take responsibility. When someone makes a promise or gives information, trust means accepting that the person stands behind their words. Groups, however, work differently. Their statements emerge from internal processes, committees, and hierarchies. Because no single person takes responsibility for the group's words, it is unclear whether those words can be trusted in the same sense. Hawley also questions whether groups can be targets of emotional responses—what philosophers call reactive attitudes. When individuals lie, they can be blamed or resented. But when a group fails, our reaction is often directed at the institution, not as a person, but as a faceless structure. Although people express anger toward corporations or governments, this emotional response lacks the personal quality that makes interpersonal trust meaningful. As a result, she claims, groups cannot be true bearers of trust or distrust. Bennett disagrees. He proposes an alternative account of trust, based on commitment rather than emotion. Trust, in this view, means believing that someone—or some group—has made a commitment to act in a certain way. This commitment-based model allows trust to apply to both individuals and collectives. For example, if a university pledges to uphold academic freedom, people can trust it—not because they feel warm emotions toward it, but because they believe it is committed to that principle. He extends this idea to distinguish trust from mere reliance. One may rely on a machine or an algorithm to perform a task, but trust involves a belief in the actor's underlying motivations. In the case of groups, people trust when they believe the group can form intentions and following through. A government might be seen as trustworthy if it consistently acts according to stated values, even if its actions are not perfect. This distinction matters. It explains why people express loyalty to institutions, and why the collapse of that trust can feel like betrayal. When citizens say they trust a political party, they mean more than that it produces favourable outcomes. They are aligning themselves with the group's declared commitments and values. Bennett argues that this deeper view of group trust supports the validity of tools like the Trust in Government index. These measurements are not just about competence but reflect judgments about whether institutions are seen as committed to the public good. By preserving the concept of trust, we gain insight into how people relate to collective entities—not as machines, but as actors whose motives and values matter. In sum, Bennett defends the idea that trust in groups is possible and meaningful. By focusing on the idea of commitment rather than emotion, he offers a model that explains how trust can operate even when personal responsibility is spread across many people. This approach helps clarify why

[496] Bennett, M. (2021) 'Trusting groups', Philosophical Studies, 178(10), pp. 3199–3219.

trust in institutions remains central to social life, and why distinguishing trust from reliance is more than a semantic exercise—it is essential to understanding how society holds itself together.

Groups lie more than individuals

In their study[497] 'Do groups lie more than individuals? Honesty and deception as a function of strategic self-interest', Taya R. Cohen and her colleagues set out to answer a troubling question: are groups more likely to lie than individuals? Their research, rooted in behavioural experiments, reveals a nuanced answer. It turns out that groups do lie more than individuals, but only when lying clearly serves their economic interests. When truthfulness can be strategically useful, groups tend to lie less. This suggests that groups are not inherently less honest than individuals, but they are more calculated in their behaviour. The researchers begin by pointing to earlier studies showing that groups behave in more self-interested ways than individuals. In various decision-making games, groups have been found to be more competitive, more aggressive, and more inclined to maximise outcomes for themselves. This background raises the question of whether such strategic tendencies might also make groups more prone to dishonesty. But unlike aggression or negotiation tactics, deception had not been as thoroughly studied in this context. Cohen and her team introduce two main forces behind dishonest behaviour in groups: fear and greed. Fear drives defensive deception—lying to avoid loss or harm—while greed motivates offensive deception—lying to gain something. In intergroup contexts, both forces are heightened. People feel less personal responsibility when acting as part of a group, and they are more likely to act in ways that maximise collective gain, even at the cost of ethical considerations. To test their theory, the researchers divided participants into groups or assigned to act individually in a controlled experiment. Each participant or group had the chance to lie or tell the truth in a scenario that involved financial outcomes. The experiment manipulated whether the consequences of lying were certain or uncertain. This allowed the researchers to see whether people would behave differently when the risks and benefits of deception were clearer. The findings were revealing. When the benefits of lying were guaranteed, 82% of groups chose to deceive, compared to just 48% of individuals. But when the outcomes were uncertain, groups were more cautious and lied less often than individuals. This supports the idea that groups are not just more dishonest—they are more strategic. They make decisions based not on emotional reactions or personal values, but on calculated judgments about what will bring the best results. The study has broader implications. In public life, many of the most damaging scandals—corporate frauds, political cover-ups, institutional failures—are the result of group decisions. This research helps explain why that happens. Groups are more likely to engage in calculated deception when they believe it will bring collective rewards. But they are also capable of restraint when honesty serves their long-term interests. The behaviour of groups in moral dilemmas is shaped less by principles than by incentives. Understanding this difference helps explain why individuals may act one way on their own, and another when embedded in a collective. It also highlights the importance of building structures and incentives that reward transparency at the group level. Groups are not inherently dishonest—but they are rational, and sometimes, that can make all the difference. Rationality alone does not guarantee honesty, morality, or justice, for a group can act with perfect logic in pursuit of profoundly unethical ends.

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[497] Cohen, T.R., Gunia, B.C., Kim-Jun, S.Y. and Murnighan, J.K. (2009) ‘Do groups lie more than individuals? Honesty and deception as a function of strategic self-interest’, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45(6), pp. 1321–1324.

Evolution of systematic lying

Language did not evolve merely to transmit facts. It emerged as the basis of sociability, enabling humans to form communities and navigate complex social environments. Beyond conveying truth, language also made deception possible. The capacity to lie—far from being a defect—appears deeply embedded in the structure of language itself. In their study 'Do groups lie more than individuals?', Taya R. Cohen and her colleagues explored this function of language in a group setting, asking whether collectives are more prone to deception than individuals. Their findings revealed that groups lie more when deception ensures benefits yet lie less when honesty serves as a strategic advantage. This shows that groups do not lie blindly; they adapt their use of language based on collective goals. The strategic manipulation of language is not a modern invention. It began early in human history as people formed larger and more structured communities. With the rise of social living, words gained power—not only to express but to influence, persuade, and mislead. Lying became part of the social toolkit, useful in negotiations, conflicts, and the construction of alliances. In this evolutionary context, group lying can be understood as a refinement of individual deception. When groups speak, their statements often carry collective intention. This makes group language more calculated and more detached from personal conscience. But the evolution of deception also gave rise to something more constructive: the creation of fictions. As language became capable of organised lying, it enabled the development of myths, ideologies, and shared beliefs. These collective fictions do not necessarily deceive in harmful ways. They often serve to unite people through common narratives. A story about divine justice or national destiny may not be true, but it fosters solidarity. The same cognitive mechanisms that allow groups to lie in experiments also enable societies to create narratives that bind millions of strangers together. Language, then, developed along two paths: one directed toward truth and cooperation, the other toward manipulation and control. These paths are not opposites but intertwined. Truth and fiction often coexist in the same sentence, and the line between honest expression and persuasive distortion is rarely clear. As groups become larger and more abstract—nations, corporations, churches—their use of language becomes more detached from individual accountability. In this way, language becomes a medium not of shared experience but of mass coordination. This coordination often relies on constructed truths that are believable, repeatable, and useful, regardless of their factual content. The research confirms that when placed in situations demanding choice, groups do not operate as collections of individual moralities. They behave as strategic units. They weigh consequences. They calibrate language to outcomes. In this light, systematic lying is not an aberration of group behaviour—it is a product of social rationality. It reflects the way humans have learnt to use language to navigate cooperation and competition simultaneously. In sum, language is central to the formation of human community, not only because it allows for truth-telling but because it enables shared fictions. These fictions, though rooted in the capacity to deceive, have allowed societies to create meaning, identity, and cohesion at a scale that would be impossible through honest communication alone. Group lying is not simply moral failure; it is also an indicator of how language has evolved to manage the demands of collective life. Organized collective lying represents the pinnacle of language's evolution, a stage known as ideology.

Are people always more dishonest in groups?

The idea that groups lie more than individuals is well-supported in behavioural research. But the picture changes when the harm caused by lying becomes visible and specific. In the

study 'Are groups always more dishonest than individuals?[498]' by Geoffrey Castillo, Lawrence Choo, and Veronika Grimm, the authors explore how dishonesty changes when groups know their actions harm a third party, in this case, a local charity. The key question is whether the presence of visible victims makes groups less likely to lie than individuals. Many past experiments use tasks where dishonesty only affects the experimenter, and the cost of lying is abstract. But real-life dishonesty always has victims. In the financial world, the health sector, or aid work, lying affects real people. The researchers created an experiment that made these consequences more concrete. Participants either worked alone or in small groups and reported the results of a virtual die roll. Their payout depended on the number they claimed to see. In the base scenario, exaggerating the number simply meant more money for the participant. But in the charity condition, exaggerating reduced the amount of money going to a local nonprofit. The results were surprising. In the base condition, groups lied more than individuals, echoing previous findings. But when lying hurt the charity, groups were no more dishonest than individuals—and in some cases, they lied less. Group chats revealed fewer suggestions to lie in the charity condition, and honest participants had more influence. This suggests that when harm is visible, moral concerns become more prominent in group discussions. Another finding showed that dishonesty spreads. People in dishonest groups were more likely to behave dishonestly later. But even here, the presence of a real victim reduced this contagion effect. When the researchers made the harm even more obvious by sending transcripts of group decisions to the charity, the results did not change much. This suggests that the act of discussing decisions in a group, combined with the awareness of real consequences, does more to reduce dishonesty than surveillance or guilt. To assess whether the presence of the charity simply made people more generous, the researchers included a dictator game where people split money with the charity without needing to lie. Here, group and individual behaviour was the same. This implies that the reduction in dishonesty was not because groups became more altruistic. Instead, the visibility of harm directly shaped how they made decisions. The study offers a subtle view of how dishonesty works in social settings. Groups may lie more when the consequences are abstract or distant. But when the damage is made clear and moral accountability enters the conversation, groups can self-regulate. Honesty, in this context, depends not just on individual values but on how the situation is framed and whether the harm caused by lying is visible and shared.

Liar! Liar!

In their article 'Liar! Liar! Your Pants Are on Fire: Deceptive Communication in the Workplace[499]', Julie Indvik and Pamela R. Johnson examine the widespread role of deception in professional settings. They argue that lying, from harmless white lies to serious fraud, is not an exception in the workplace but a regular part of daily interactions. Whether it is to gain an edge, protect one's image, or avoid consequences, deception often becomes a survival strategy in competitive and impersonal work environments. Despite early lessons that truthfulness is a virtue, many people grow into professional roles where deception becomes normalised and even expected. The financial impact of workplace dishonesty is substantial. In the United States alone, estimates range from \$6 billion to as much as \$200 billion lost annually due to deceptive practices. These costs include everything from inflated expense reports to large-scale accounting fraud. But the damage is not just economic. Trust, once broken, is hard to rebuild.

[498] Castillo, G., Choo, L. and Grimm, V. (2021) 'Are groups always more dishonest than individuals? The case of salient negative externalities', Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization, 190, pp. 783–797.
[499] Indvik, J. and Johnson, P.R. (2009) 'Liar! Liar! Your Pants Are on Fire: Deceptive Communication in the Workplace', Academy of Management Perspectives, 23(4), pp. 84–86.

When deception becomes routine, it corrodes the relationships and communication structures on which businesses depend. Indvik and Johnson also place workplace lying in a broader historical and cultural context. People have always lied, and societies have long sought ways to uncover deception. Ancient trials by ordeal, outdated theories like phrenology, and modern tools like polygraphs or AI deception detectors all reflect this persistent concern. Yet scientific research shows that humans are poor lie detectors. Common beliefs—like reading eye movements or facial expressions—often fail. Even experienced professionals struggle to reliably identify deception, performing only slightly better than chance. According to the authors, a lie is any message designed to deliberately mislead. People lie for many reasons—fear of failure, social pressure, habit, or to gain rewards. The modern workplace often rewards polished presentation over raw honesty. Employees are taught to frame mistakes in positive language, spin achievements, and navigate office politics with tactful exaggerations. These habits can evolve into deeper dishonesty when people feel trapped in unrealistic expectations. The longer these falsehoods go unchecked, the more damage they can cause to a person's reputation or a company's credibility. Despite how common lying is, most people remain uncomfortable with the idea of being deceptive. Studies cited in the article show that individuals lie in about one in five extended conversations. Interestingly, people underestimate how often they lie, or how often they are lied to. Over time, keeping track of what was said, who was misled, and what version of the story was shared becomes exhausting. Mistakes slip through, and reputations suffer. The article also offers guidance to managers. One key idea is that leaders shape the ethical tone of a workplace. When perfection is demanded and mistakes are punished harshly, employees are more likely to lie to cover up errors. In contrast, work cultures that accept occasional failure and reward transparency can reduce the pressure to deceive. Managers who model honest behaviour and provide psychological safety foster a more trustworthy environment. Indvik and Johnson's work shows that deception is both a tool and a threat. It can help smooth social interactions or secure short-term wins. But over time, its costs—broken trust, damaged relationships, and financial loss—outweigh the benefits. Understanding why people lie and creating work cultures that reduce the need to lie, is essential to building healthier and more effective organisations.

Partial lying and social image concern

In their study 'Groups versus individuals, partial lying, and social image concern in a dice-rolling experiment[500]', Yoshitaka Okano and Eiji Goto examine how lying behaviour differs between individuals and groups of close friends. Using a dice-rolling experiment, they focus not just on whether people lie, but how much and why. Both individuals and groups lie, but groups tend to lie partially rather than going to the extreme. Interestingly, groups also show more concern about how their actions are perceived, especially by those they know. The experiment involved a simple setup. Participants rolled a six-sided die in private and reported the result. Their pay depended on the number they reported—higher numbers meant more money, except for six, which yielded nothing. In the group condition, two friends had to agree on the reported number. Before rolling, they filled out a questionnaire about their friendship, creating a setting that mirrors real-life situations where decisions happen within familiar relationships. The researchers proposed three outcomes. One was that groups would go straight for the highest reward, lying boldly because they could share responsibility. Another was those groups, out of concern for social image, would lie moderately—choosing a number that still

[500] Okano, Y. and Goto, E. (2021) 'Groups versus individuals, partial lying, and social image concern in a dice-rolling experiment', Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization, 188, pp. 624–635.

increased their reward but did not seem obviously dishonest. The third option was that a friend might act as a moral check, encouraging the group to tell the truth. What they found was telling. Groups did lie, but not to the fullest extent. Instead of always picking the highest paying number, they often chose a middle value—one that brought some benefit without being too obvious. The number three came up far more often than chance would predict. This form of partial lying allowed group members to balance the desire for money with the need to appear honest to each other. To explain this behaviour, Okano and Goto turned to two theoretical models. The first, by Dufwenberg and Dufwenberg, looked at how people react to the size of a lie. But this model did not match the experimental data well, especially for groups. The second, by Khalmetski and Sliwka, added a layer about social image—how bad it feels to be seen as a liar. This model worked much better. It showed that groups were more sensitive to being perceived as dishonest and felt less internal cost for lying, likely because they shared the blame. These findings matter because many real-world decisions happen in group settings, often between people who know each other. The study suggests that in such cases, people do not simply chase the biggest gain. Instead, they weigh self-interest against social consequences. Being caught in a lie among friends is not just risky, it is embarrassing. So, people lie in a way that lets them feel clever without losing face. Okano and Goto's research shows that deception in groups is nuanced. It is not just a strategy for personal gain—it is also a way to maintain harmony and manage social bonds. Their work adds to the growing understanding that dishonesty is shaped not only by what people want but also by how they wish to be perceived.

Miscommunication during collaborative action

In the study 'Predictions of Miscommunication in Verbal Communication During Collaborative Joint Action[501]' by Alexandra Paxton, Jennifer M. Roche, Alyssa Ibarra, and Michael K. Tanenhaus, researchers explored the subtle ways verbal communication can break down during collaborative tasks. Their aim was to identify what aspects of language use—especially lexical choices and pragmatic cues—predict whether a message will be successfully understood or lead to miscommunication. The experiment involved pairs of participants working together to build three-dimensional puzzles. They had to rely solely on spoken language, without any shared visual reference. This setup created a controlled environment where every misunderstanding could be traced back to the structure and content of spoken turns. The researchers analysed the conversations by marking features such as the ratio of content words (lexical density), the use of spatial terms, affirmations like 'yes', moments where participants confirmed each other's statements (grounding), and whether a turn was answering a question. Their findings showed that successful exchanges often had higher lexical density, featured affirmation, and included grounding behaviour. These cues helped maintain a shared understanding. On the other hand, miscommunication frequently occurred when speakers used spatial terms without clearly confirming what those terms meant to their partner. Answers to questions, too, often resulted in brief, less informative responses, which sometimes contributed to confusion. Though the use of negation was suspected to play a role in communication breakdowns, the data did not consistently support this. In some cases, short responses like 'uh-huh' or 'yes' created trouble. While such responses might be meant as simple acknowledgements, they could easily be mistaken for full agreement or understanding. This led to misalignment, where one speaker thought they had been understood, while the other had not

[501] Paxton, A., Roche, J.M., Ibarra, A. and Tanenhaus, M.K. (2020) 'Predictions of Miscommunication in Verbal Communication During Collaborative Joint Action', Topics in Cognitive Science, 12(3), pp. 1042–1063.

yet grasped the meaning. When communication failed, follow-up turns tended to contain fewer content words, as if the speakers were simplifying rather than clarifying. The balance between saying enough and saying too much was delicate. Further analysis found that participants often adjusted their speech when they sensed miscommunication, though not always successfully. Grounding attempts during questions led to less content-rich speech, due to the effort to respond quickly or the challenge of clarifying meaning without visual support. Even when speakers tried to be efficient, skipping too much detail made it harder for their partner to follow along. This research highlights how common and natural miscommunication is, especially in situations where people cannot rely on visual cues or shared physical context. The effort to keep language brief and efficient—something that normally aids smooth conversation—can backfire when the listener lacks the background needed to interpret what is said. The study emphasises that miscommunication is not about mistakes; it is often the result of reasonable strategies that do not match up in real-time interaction. These findings suggest that improving communication, particularly in high-pressure or high-risk environments, means paying close attention to both language form and context. Simple misunderstandings can escalate when cues are misread. By recognising the signals that precede miscommunication, it may be possible to design better tools and training to support clearer interaction, especially in fields like medicine, aviation, or emergency response, where the cost of a misheard word can be extremely high.

2.2. Biased language

(The filters of thought: Bias and the fragility of interpretation)

'Every act of communication is a gamble: what is said is never what is heard'.

— Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc.

'Meaning is not what the speaker intends, nor what the listener hears—but what survives between them'.

— Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class?

'All words are prejudices'.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science

Bias

Bias can be understood as a tendency to lean in favour of or against something in a way that often distorts perception or judgment. It may be built into personal beliefs or arise from social learning. In everyday life, bias affects conversations, decisions, and relationships. In science, it refers to systematic errors that distort results, such as when data is gathered or interpreted unfairly. Whether conscious or not, bias influences how people see the world and how they act in it. The word comes from Old French and Provençal roots that mean 'slant' or 'sideways'. It was first used in English to describe the curve of a weighted bowling ball, which veers off course due to its shape. Over time, the term came to refer to minds that drift off

balance, pulled by partial views or prior leanings. Cognitive bias is among the most common types. These are systematic errors in how people think, remember, or make decisions. For instance, anchoring describes the way people fixate on initial information and fail to adjust enough from it. Apophenia involves seeing patterns in randomness, which can cause people to draw false connections. The halo effect leads someone to judge a person's entire character based on a single positive trait, while the horn effect does the opposite. Confirmation bias is another major type, where people seek information that matches their beliefs and ignore what does not. These habits shape how opinions form and how they resist change. Other biases are tied to personal or financial gain. Conflict of interest occurs when someone's judgment is influenced by outside benefit. Bribery and favouritism fall into this category. Lobbying can also introduce bias by tilting public policy in favour of powerful interests rather than broader well-being. In research, bias can undermine the credibility of findings. Statistical bias emerges when data is skewed by flawed methods or sample selection. Forecast bias happens when predictions consistently miss in one direction. The observer-expectancy effect shows how researchers' expectations can influence subjects. Social desirability bias occurs when people give answers that make them look good rather than tell the truth. Bias is also present in social prejudices. Racism, sexism, classism, and ageism all involve judgments based on identity rather than facts. Implicit bias, a term coined by psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, refers to unconscious attitudes that guide reactions and decisions. These biases often work beneath the surface and can shape behaviour in ways people do not recognise. Context shapes how bias appears. In education, some textbooks may present a biased view of history or culture. In the media, stories can be selected or framed to support certain narratives. In law enforcement, practices like racial profiling reveal how deeply bias can be embedded in institutions. In sum, bias is more than just a personal flaw. It can be cognitive, social, or structural. It can affect judgment, communication, science, and justice. Recognising its many forms is the first step toward addressing its effects.

Reality of cognitive illusions

In their research[502] on judgment under uncertainty, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky argue that humans often rely on mental shortcuts, or heuristics, that help in decision-making but also lead to consistent errors. Their work focuses on biases that arise from using heuristics such as availability, representativeness, and anchoring. These biases, they suggest, are not random flaws but systematic patterns that reveal how the mind simplifies complex problems. Critics, particularly Gerd Gigerenzer, have challenged their claims. Gigerenzer argues that what Kahneman and Tversky call 'cognitive illusions' are not true errors. He believes that if problems are presented in terms of frequencies rather than probabilities, these supposed biases vanish. According to him, people are adapted to reason well in natural environments where frequency information is more relevant. But Kahneman and Tversky respond that their findings remain consistent even when frequency formats are used. They present data showing that people still neglect base rates or commit conjunction errors even when information is presented in a way that should, in theory, make the right answer more obvious. Base-rate neglect is a key example. Even when participants are told how common certain traits are in a population, they tend to ignore this and focus instead on how much a given description matches a stereotype. This remains true whether the information is given as probabilities or frequencies. The same holds for conjunction errors, where people judge the likelihood of two events occurring together as

[502] Kahneman, D. and Tversky, A. (1996) 'On the reality of cognitive illusions', Psychological Review, 103(3), pp. 582–591.

more probable than one event alone. This breaks a basic rule of probability and shows up even when questions are reformatted using frequencies. Overconfidence is another recurring issue. People often express more certainty in their judgments than the evidence supports. Kahneman and Tversky argue that this is because people rely on the 'inside view', focusing on the unique features of a specific case, rather than considering broader statistical trends. This pattern shows up in many areas, from business forecasts to personal planning. The design of experiments also matters. When participants are given multiple related tasks in a within-subjects format, they can compare and calibrate their answers more accurately. But when asked just one question in isolation—a between-subjects design—biases are more likely to appear. This undermines Gigerenzer's claim that biases only occur in artificial settings or due to poor testing methods. Kahneman and Tversky stress that the illusions they study are not just artefacts but reflect deeper cognitive tendencies. Their response to criticism emphasises the robustness of their approach. Rather than dismissing cognitive illusions as theoretical errors, they argue that the persistence of these biases reveals something important about human reasoning. Simple heuristics help people manage uncertainty, but they come at a cost. The debate between the two camps illustrates the ongoing effort to understand the strengths and limits of the mind's intuitive tools.

Partisan journalism and media bias

Jim A. Kuypers argues that American journalism has long been shaped by underlying political leanings, evolving from openly partisan newspapers into a mainstream media that still retains strong ideological bias—now more subtly embedded in journalistic practice. In the introduction to 'Partisan Journalism: A History of Media Bias in the United States[503]', Kuypers begins by examining media reactions during the early years of Barack Obama's presidency. He highlights how Democratic leaders dismissed opposing views as conspiratorial or unpatriotic, framing dissent as illegitimate rather than engaging with it directly. According to Kuypers, this reflects a broader shift in journalism—a 'conspiracy of shared values'—that prioritises liberal viewpoints while marginalising others. This ideological bias is not new, but its form has changed. In the early days of American journalism, newspapers openly supported specific political parties. These early publications were tools of political advocacy, funded by parties or governments to influence public opinion. Papers declared their allegiances and made no pretence of neutrality. During the colonial and Jacksonian periods, the press was integral to political organising and messaging. Editors were often rewarded with positions or contracts in exchange for favourable coverage. The Post Office facilitated wide distribution, enabling political ideas to reach small communities across the country. What changed, Kuypers notes, was not the presence of bias but how it was presented. As the penny press emerged in the 1830s and 1840s, papers began targeting mass audiences. Commercial imperatives pushed publishers to appear more neutral. Advertising revenue demanded broader appeal, and this encouraged a surface-level objectivity. Yet even as newspapers shifted to fact-based reporting, the framing of stories, selection of issues, and labelling of sources often reflected hidden preferences. The emergence of wire services and technologies like the telegraph emphasised speed and factual accuracy, further embedding the ideal of journalistic neutrality. But Kuypers suggests that bias never disappeared—it simply moved from overt declarations to more coded forms of influence. By the 20th century, objectivity became the standard for respectable journalism. Anchors like Walter Cronkite symbolised this norm, even as the seeds of advocacy remained. Over time,

[503] Kuypers, J. A. (2013) Partisan Journalism: A History of Media Bias in the United States. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

particularly in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, public trust declined, and journalists began to openly express their political views. Kuypers argues that this evolution toward advocacy journalism has blurred the line between news and opinion. With the rise of talk radio, cable news, and digital platforms in the 1980s and 1990s, alternative voices challenged the liberal consensus in mainstream media. Today, media bias persists, not through open declarations, but through framing, tone, and selective reporting. Kuypers shows that bias is a consistent feature of American journalism, though its form has changed. From overtly partisan newspapers to ideologically aligned but nominally objective media, the press has always reflected political values. Recognising these patterns is essential for understanding how journalism shapes public discourse and political power.

Written language bias in linguistics

In 'The Written Language Bias in Linguistics[504]' Per Linell argues that modern linguistics suffers from a persistent bias toward written language. Despite widespread agreement that spoken language comes first in both individual development and human history, the dominant theories in the language sciences continue to reflect assumptions rooted in written communication. This contradiction runs deep. Linguistic models often treat language as a static system of abstract forms—morphemes, words, and sentences—rather than a set of socially embedded practices. Much of linguistic theory, from grammar and phonology to semantics and discourse analysis, reflects values drawn from the culture of writing: structure, clarity, permanence, and formal correctness. Linell traces this bias through a long intellectual history. Western linguistics has traditionally focused on language as a formal object. From Aristotle through to Saussure and Chomsky, language has been defined in terms of its structure—rules, categories, and symbolic relationships. Writing fits neatly into this model. Written texts are composed of visible, discrete units that can be isolated, analysed, and compared. They endure through time and space. They also encourage standardisation and allow for editing, which makes them appear more organised and complete than spontaneous speech. Over time, these properties have shaped how linguists think about language itself. In contrast, spoken language is fleeting, embodied, and co-produced in real time. It depends on context, gestures, facial expressions, and turn-taking. It allows for interruptions, repetitions, repairs, and hesitations. Talk is more than a string of sounds—it is a social act, responsive and shaped by interaction. Yet this richness is often overlooked when language is studied only through transcripts or reduced to a set of abstract rules. Linell highlights how speech is often treated as deficient or incomplete, a rough version of the polished, correct form captured in writing. The book outlines two major ways of understanding language. One approach, dominant in structural and generative linguistics, views language as an abstract system of forms. Language is understood as a mental code, independent of its use. The other approach, emerging from fields like conversation analysis and sociolinguistics, sees language as social action. Here, speaking is not just transmitting meaning—it is doing something with others in a shared context. This view emphasises talk-in-interaction and considers language a practical accomplishment. Linell stresses that the written language bias is not just theoretical. It affects how language is taught, assessed, and preserved. Educational systems privilege written language. Grammar rules are derived from writing, and students are taught that writing reflects the correct form of the language. Dialects and speech varieties that do not conform to these standards are often stigmatised. Even in research, spoken language data is usually transcribed and analysed through

[504] Linell, P. (2005) The Written Language Bias in Linguistics: Its Nature, Origins and Transformations. London: Routledge.

frameworks designed for writing. This reinforces the idea that language is best understood in visual, discrete, and fixed units. The divide between speech and writing is not absolute, however. New technologies blur the lines. Online messages, voice notes, and social media posts combine elements of both media. Some speech events are highly scripted, while some writing mimics informal speech. Despite these overlaps, the underlying assumptions in linguistic theory still favour writing. Linell calls for a shift away from this narrow view. He argues for a more dialogical perspective that recognises language as something people do together. This would mean taking spoken interaction seriously—not just as raw data to be cleaned up, but as language in its fullest, most dynamic form. Linell's analysis reveals a deep contradiction at the heart of linguistics. Although speech is recognised as primary in human communication, the field continues to be shaped by values and assumptions derived from writing. This written language bias limits how language is understood and studied. To move forward, linguistic theory must acknowledge the social, interactive, and embodied nature of language in use.

People's languages vs. Linguists' grammars

In 'The Written Language Bias in Linguistics' Per Linell also explores the deep divide between how ordinary people experience language and how linguists define and model it. One of the central issues he raises is that linguists often create abstract systems—grammars—that reflect their own theoretical commitments rather than the actual, lived practices of language users. These grammars, while structured and elegant, frequently fail to capture the messiness, context-dependence, and variability of real speech. Instead of describing language as people use it, many linguistic theories describe language as it appears on paper. A key source of this gap lies in what Linell calls the 'written language bias'. From the earliest stages of linguistic theorising, scholars have relied on texts—written sentences, formal rules, dictionaries—to model what language is. This bias has led to a belief in language as a stable, standardised object. Words and sentences are treated as fixed units with defined meanings and grammatical relationships. But this is not how language operates in daily life. People speak in fragments, repeat themselves, shift topics, change registers, rely on gestures, and interpret meaning based on context. Theories built on writing often ignore or minimise these features. One important debate Linell discusses is about where language 'is'. Some scholars, like Roy Harris, argue that language is not an external system to be discovered but a set of ideas constructed by linguists. For Harris, many linguistic theories are 'made-up' in the sense that they impose artificial order on practices that are far more fluid. Others, like Noam Chomsky, argue the opposite: that language is a mental structure, a cognitive system hardwired into the human brain. For Chomsky, the way people speak—full of errors, hesitations, and regional differences—is irrelevant. What matters is the idealised internal grammar shared by all native speakers. This leads to a curious conclusion: that people's everyday language is linguistically irrelevant. Linell takes issue with both extremes. He suggests that language must be understood as a social activity that emerges from interaction. It is not just in the brain, nor just a cultural invention. It is something people do together. The theories linguists construct should not float above actual speech practices. They should be grounded in how people talk, listen, respond, and make meaning together. This dialogical view of language insists that grammar is not a fixed code but a pattern that evolves through use. The tension between people's languages and linguists' grammars also has political and educational consequences. Standard languages—those codified in textbooks and grammar guides—are often treated as the only legitimate forms of language. Dialects, slang, and nonstandard varieties are dismissed as incorrect. Yet these so-called 'errors' are often rule-governed and expressive, shaped by history, identity, and social function. Linguistic theory, by favouring abstract rules over everyday usage, helps reinforce linguistic

inequality. Linell argues for a shift in how language is studied. Rather than starting with theories built from written norms, linguists should begin with actual speech. Language should be seen as dynamic, embodied, and socially situated. People's languages are not broken versions of ideal grammar; they are the real thing. The grammars linguists build must be brought closer to the languages people live by.

Language divide

In 'The Study of Speech Processes: Addressing the Writing Bias in Language Science[505]' Victor J. Boucher explores how language science has long been shaped by a bias toward writing. From the earliest language classes to academic research, the study of language is typically grounded in written examples and standardised transcriptions. Students are introduced to sentences as neat, rule-governed units on a page, detached from the physical and sensory realities of spoken communication. This focus on text encourages the view that language is an abstract mental system, separate from the messier, embodied act of speaking. Boucher argues that this perspective creates a deep divide between language and speech. Alphabetic writing, with its clear segments and punctuation, imposes a structure on speech that does not naturally exist. Transcriptions, especially in unfamiliar languages, often misrepresent the fluidity, rhythm, and nuance of real-time interaction. As a result, linguists may treat written language as more foundational than spoken language, even though speech is primary in human development and social interaction. This division has roots in the history of linguistic thought. Thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure promoted the idea of a language faculty housed in the brain, distinct from speech. Saussure's focus on arbitrary signs and mental representations suggested that language could be studied independently of how people speak. Clinical studies of aphasia supported this view, reinforcing the belief that language resides in isolated brain regions like Broca's area. But modern research has challenged these assumptions. Observations from surgical cases and studies of infants with severe brain malformations show that speech and language are more widely distributed in the brain and more integrated than once thought. The idea that language is purely a cognitive system is further undermined by evidence from acoustic phonetics. Studies by researchers like Lindblom demonstrate that vowel systems can be predicted based on how sounds are produced and perceived. For instance, speakers tend to create vowels that maximise auditory contrast, suggesting that phonological systems are shaped by physical and sensory constraints, not just abstract mental rules. This challenges the belief that phonemes and other linguistic features exist independently of their spoken form. Boucher also critiques the tools traditionally used to study speech. Because early linguists lacked instruments to measure speech acoustics, they relied on transcriptions and invented categories like phonemes based on written representation. Even today, these categories persist in textbooks and theoretical models, despite being at odds with what actual speech data show. Technologies like spectrograms and motion tracking now reveal that speech is continuous, overlapping, and shaped by feedback between movement and perception. Boucher calls for a shift in how linguists approach language. Rather than treating speech as secondary to written language, researchers should start from the motor-sensory processes that define spoken communication. Language is not a detached code, but a dynamic, embodied activity shaped by physical constraints and social context. Recognising this reality is essential for building a science of language that reflects how people speak and understand one another.

[505] Boucher, V. J. (2020) The Study of Speech Processes: Addressing the Writing Bias in Language Science. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The bias of communication

In 'The Bias of Communication[506]' Harold Innis examines how different media of communication shape the development of culture, politics, and knowledge. His core argument is that every medium has a built-in bias. Some preserve information over long periods, while others enable it to travel quickly across space. This technical difference is not neutral. It affects how societies organise power and how cultures evolve. Innis traces this bias back to the earliest civilisations. Ancient Mesopotamia used clay tablets for record keeping. The medium was durable, which meant knowledge could last through generations. But it was heavy and hard to transport, making it better for local administration than for spreading ideas across large territories. Egypt, by contrast, used papyrus. It was lighter and more mobile, which allowed for broader communication but at the cost of permanence. Each medium carried with it a set of social consequences. The type of medium a civilisation favours tends to reflect its priorities. Durable media like stone or parchment support long-term institutions, centralised control, and religious or legal authority. In Egypt, for instance, the material conditions—such as the Nile's floods and the use of monumental architecture—encouraged a focus on time, death, and continuity. This was reflected in the construction of pyramids and the fixation on calendars and mummification. Writing, through hieroglyphics, became a tool to reinforce divine authority and central governance. In contrast, societies that embraced lighter media often developed more flexible, decentralised forms of governance. In Mesopotamia, trade and local autonomy flourished as clay and cuneiform facilitated short-range, practical communication. The invention of the alphabet and its spread through papyrus brought new possibilities. It allowed for quicker learning and wider use, reducing the monopoly of writing held by priestly or royal elites. When the printing press emerged in Europe, it marked a turning point. The transition from handwritten manuscripts to mass-produced books broke the control of knowledge by narrow institutions like the church. It opened the door to vernacular languages, secular literature, and widespread education. This led to major political and religious upheavals, including the Reformation and the Enlightenment. New media did not just change how information was shared. They altered who could access knowledge and who had the power to define it. Innis also explores the rise of modern media such as newspapers, radio, and film. Each brought its own form of bias. Newspapers encouraged regional diversity and civic engagement. Radio, however, promoted centralised messaging. Its immediacy and reach made it a tool of state propaganda and corporate influence. The more centralised a medium becomes, the more it tends to favour uniformity over dialogue, continuity over change. The tension between oral and written traditions is a central theme in Innis's work. Oral cultures emphasise memory, performance, and community. They allow knowledge to adapt and evolve through conversation. Written cultures, especially when dominated by one medium, tend to freeze meaning and authority. Yet neither form is permanent. Each new medium disrupts the balance, reshaping how people communicate, govern, and remember. Innis warns that societies often become trapped by their dominant media. When a medium becomes too powerful, it creates monopolies of knowledge that stifle innovation and isolate communication. The solution is not to reject media, but to remain aware of their influence. Only by recognising the bias of each medium can cultures maintain balance between permanence and change, between control and creativity.

[506] Innis, H. (1951) The Bias of Communication. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Guide to media bias

In 'Skewed: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Media Bias Larry Atkins[507]' Larry Atkins explores how communication media influence the way people perceive reality and how these influences can distort the democratic process. His work builds on the recognition that every form of media brings with it a particular bias, not just in content, but in structure. Whether it is a newspaper, television broadcast, or a digital platform, the format itself shapes what is said and how it is received. This bias, though often subtle, has powerful effects on the distribution of knowledge and the formation of public opinion. Historically, the medium used to preserve and transmit information has shaped cultural and political development. Ancient civilisations relied on materials like stone or clay, which were heavy and durable. These media favoured permanence over flexibility. In Egypt, for example, the use of stone inscriptions helped enforce religious and royal authority. In contrast, more portable materials like papyrus allowed for wider dissemination of texts and a loosening of centralised control. As new forms of media became available, they disrupted older systems of knowledge and power. The invention of the printing press in Europe marked a major shift. It enabled mass literacy and challenged the monopoly of the church and state over written knowledge. Books became more accessible, and the use of vernacular languages flourished. This was followed by newspapers, which expanded public access to information and allowed for more immediate engagement with current events. But as Atkins notes, even these developments came with limitations. Print media, for all their democratising potential, could still serve elite interests through ownership, editorial control, and selective reporting. In modern times, the proliferation of cable news and digital platforms has intensified media bias. Advocacy journalism, as Atkins calls it, deliberately blends fact and opinion to support specific ideological positions. This form of journalism does not just report the news—it frames it in ways that reinforce existing beliefs. The result is a fragmented media environment in which different audiences live in informational bubbles. People receive stories tailored to their political leanings, and exposure to opposing views becomes increasingly rare. This trend has serious implications. When media sources reinforce rather than challenge beliefs, public discourse becomes polarised. Viewers trust outlets that confirm their worldview and distrust those that do not. The emphasis on emotional appeal, outrage, and sensationalism further reduces the space for balanced analysis. Atkins argues that this is not just a matter of personal preference or political taste. It reflects deeper structural changes in how media are produced, consumed, and monetised. Understanding the historical and technical aspects of communication helps explain why media bias has become more entrenched. From the carved symbols of early civilisation to the high-speed circulation of online headlines, the form of media has always shaped its content. As Atkins points out, modern technologies have amplified this effect, making it easier for media outlets to customise their messages—and for audiences to avoid anything unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

Rationalist bias

In 'Trumping Reason: Rationalist Bias in Communication Theory[508]' Leonard Shedletsky explores how traditional communication theory often leans on rationalist assumptions, overlooking the role of intuition, emotion, and cognitive bias in human discourse. His critique is especially relevant in the context of Donald Trump’s political communication, which resists

[507] Atkins, L. (2016) Skewed: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Media Bias. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
[508] Shedletsky, L. (2020) Trumping Reason: Rationalist Bias in Communication Theory. In R. Schwartzman (ed.) Political Communication in the Post-Truth Era. London: Routledge.

rational critique yet remains effective. Trump's language does not rely on logical argument but instead activates instinctual reactions. His success lies not in his evidence, but in his emotional resonance with followers. This exposes a gap in communication theory, which often assumes people make decisions by weighing facts and logic. People frequently rely on quick, affective judgments. Shedletsky, drawing on Roy Schwartzman's research, explains how Trump's rhetoric bypasses rational processes. It uses vivid anecdotes instead of statistics, appeals to fear and disgust, and frames opponents as threats to moral purity. His repeated claims, even when proven false, tap into mental shortcuts that shape people's understanding of reality. Concepts like the availability heuristic and loss aversion explain why emotionally charged, simple messages gain traction. For example, calling COVID-19 the 'China virus' simplifies a complex issue while triggering xenophobic associations. These rhetorical choices are not accidental. They exploit cognitive habits that resist correction. Moral foundations theory adds another layer. Trump's messages activate values like loyalty, sanctity, and authority. These resonate deeply with his base, forming moral narratives that define who belong and who threatens the group. In this framework, facts matter less than alignment with one's moral community. Attempts to counter misinformation with evidence often fail because they do not address the emotional and moral structures supporting belief. The rationalist model assumes people will adjust their views when presented with facts. But emotional attachments to certain narratives create a filter through which all new information is processed. This bias in communication theory mirrors another psychological phenomenon—pseudostupidity. Lawrence Cohn, a psychoanalyst, describes it as a defensive inhibition where people seem less intelligent than they are because of unresolved internal conflicts. In political discourse, something similar happens. People may reject obvious truths not because they are unintelligent, but because accepting them threatens their identity or loyalties. Trump's communication taps into these defences, reinforcing a worldview that feels secure, even when it is logically flawed. Emotional satisfaction outweighs intellectual clarity. Shedletsky calls for a revision of communication theory. He argues that to understand public discourse today, especially in a post-truth environment, scholars must incorporate cognitive science, psychology, and behavioural economics. Communication is not just an exchange of ideas; it is a drama of identity, emotion, and power. Messages are not weighed on a rational scale but embraced or rejected based on how they make people feel and what they affirm about their values. In conclusion, Shedletsky, like Schwartzman's and Cohn's, highlights how emotional bias, heuristics, and unconscious defences shape political speech and public belief. Human communication is driven less by slow, deliberate reasoning than by rapid, unconscious intuitions, making the social intuitionist view a more accurate framework than the rationalist model. Rationalist bias blinds communication theory to the reality that people embrace messages less for their logic than for the emotional and moral worlds they affirm.

Dialectical analysis of bias

In 'One-Sided Arguments: A Dialectical Analysis of Bias[509]' Douglas Walton offers a detailed examination of how bias functions in argumentation, particularly in informal logic and critical thinking. His central claim is that bias is not always negative; instead, it can range from acceptable partiality to a dangerous distortion of reasoning. The issue arises when arguments become so one-sided that they fail to engage with counterarguments or resist reasonable doubt. Walton traces this problem back to classical philosophy, where Plato and Aristotle distinguished between dialectical exchange and the eristic methods of the Sophists. Dialectic,

[509] Walton, D. (1999) One-Sided Arguments: A Dialectical Analysis of Bias. Albany: SUNY Press.

for them, was a cooperative search for truth, while eristic was combative and focused on winning, often at the expense of fairness. Historically, the study of bias was revived during the Enlightenment. Thinkers like Francis Bacon and Antoine Arnauld identified personal interest, emotion, and self-deception as barriers to clear thinking. By the 20th century, textbooks had begun to treat bias as a psychological and rhetorical problem, focusing on how language, suggestion, and selective emphasis distort perception. Walton critiques this approach, arguing that focusing solely on the motives or psychology of the speaker misses the point. What matters more is the structure of the argument and how it plays out in dialogue. Walton emphasises that some bias is unavoidable. Having a point of view or even a commitment to a position does not necessarily undermine an argument. Problems arise only when one refuses to consider opposing views or fails to revise their stance when challenged by evidence. A judge, for example, can have personal beliefs yet still act impartially if they are able to suspend those beliefs in a fair-minded evaluation. Similarly, in everyday discourse, one may start from a biased position but still engage critically and revise their view. This openness to change distinguishes fairmindedness from dogmatism. One of Walton's key contributions is identifying ten practical indicators for detecting bias. These include financial interest, selective argument use, treating similar cases differently, rigid stereotyping, and the use of innuendo or hyperbole. While no single indicator proves bias on its own, several taken together can reveal a troubling pattern. For example, when someone repeats exaggerated claims, ignores opposing evidence, and refuses to acknowledge similar counterexamples, it becomes harder to see their argument as rational. Instead, it reflects a closed system of thought meant to reinforce a belief rather than test it. Walton argues that detecting bias requires looking at how the dialogue unfolds. Does the speaker engage opposing views seriously? Do they make concessions or adjust their claims in response to challenges? If not, their argument is biased. But bias, in this sense, is not just about tone or intention—it is about behaviour in dialogue. Walton calls for a balanced view of bias. It is not always a sign of bad faith or irrationality. Instead, it can signal a point of departure for productive dialogue, provided the speaker remains open to other views. Bias becomes problematic only when it blocks this openness and replaces dialectic with stubborn one-sidedness. When bias is met with openness, it can deepen understanding; when it closes off inquiry, it turns conversation into dogma.

Biased language

In Chapter Five of his book 'One-Sided Arguments: A Dialectical Analysis of Bias', Douglas Walton explores how language itself can embed bias into arguments. He focuses on the strategic use of slanted or emotionally charged words that subtly support one side of a dispute while undermining the other. These linguistic choices shape perception and often pre-empt deeper analysis. When a political group calls its opponents 'terrorists' while referring to its own members as 'freedom fighters', it uses language to do more than describe—it persuades and polarises. Walton raises two key questions. First, is the use of biased language harmful to serious argumentation? Second, if it is, what can be done about it? These questions do not have simple answers. Some argue that all language is biased by nature. Words carry connotations shaped by history, ideology, and culture. Postmodernists, for instance, embrace the political charge of words, proposing new terms to reflect alternate worldviews. On the other hand, traditional logic often sees persuasive definitions and slanted expressions as fallacies that cloud critical thinking. The abortion debate illustrates how language can drive division. One side might describe abortion as 'killing babies', while the other frames it as 'reproductive choice'. Both phrases reflect strong positions and leave little room for open discussion. When both parties redefine the same word according to their interests, dialogue breaks down. People end

up talking past each other, reinforcing their own positions without confronting the core ethical dilemmas. The use of biased language also extends to media and politics. Journalists or officials may use vague but emotionally powerful phrases like 'cleaning up the streets' or 'restoring order'. These expressions sound positive but often mask coercive or violent actions. Similarly, calling a leader a 'strongman' instead of a 'dictator' shifts the tone of the conversation without changing the facts. The public may be influenced without fully realising it. Definitions, especially in policy or scientific debates, can carry significant weight. For example, poverty may be defined in absolute terms—income below a certain level—or in relative terms—limited access to social resources. Each definition frames the issue differently and leads to different solutions. Feminist critiques of pornography also rely on redefining terms. By describing it as the objectification of women rather than mere erotic material, the conversation shifts toward questions of harm and power. Biased definitions can distort results. In breast cancer research, Walton points out that studies defined menopause differently, leading to conflicting conclusions. This inconsistency, driven by language, undermined the reliability of the findings. In such cases, bias is not just a rhetorical issue—it affects real-world knowledge. Walton does not suggest that persuasive definitions are always wrong. In advocacy, such definitions can be effective tools for shaping public debate. However, in contexts that demand fairness and clarity—like law, science, or academic discussion—biased language can obstruct critical reasoning. The key is recognising when slanted language is being used and understanding its impact. Biased language is neither always fallacious nor always neutral. It becomes problematic when it conceals disagreement, manipulates perception, or substitutes emotion for evidence. To evaluate arguments fairly, one must learn to detect these linguistic cues and judge them within their proper context. Every dialect is a fossilized worldview, carrying within its grammar and rhythms the prejudices of the tribe that spoke it into being—its gods, taboos, laws, and unspoken hierarchies woven into every word. An official language isn't a neutral medium but a state-curated creed—standardizing accent and syntax, canonising its myths and norms, demoting rival tongues—so that bias hardens into grammar.

2.1. Miscommunication

(From dialogue to disconnection: The erosion of symbolic life)

'Miscommunication is the rule, not the exception; language is a medium of approximation, not precision'.

— Paul Watzlawick, Pragmatics of Human Communication

'Meaning is not what the speaker intends, nor what the listener hears—but what survives between them'.

— Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class?

'Communication fails not in spite of language, but because of it'.

— Niklas Luhmann, Social Systems

Miscommunication

Miscommunication is often thought of in simple terms—as a misunderstanding or as the transmission of false or unclear information. In this narrow view, the problem lies in language not functioning as intended. Either the speaker fails to express their thoughts with precision, or the listener fails to comprehend the message correctly. But this functional definition conceals a deeper and more troubling implication. If communication is what binds people into societies, families, and communities, then miscommunication is not just an error of words—it is a rupture in communion itself. The prefix 'mis' does not only signify a mistake. It also carries the sense of harm, failure, or corruption. Thus, miscommunication can also mean 'bad communion'—the breakdown of shared meaning that forms the foundation of social life. In this broader sense, miscommunication is not merely a technical glitch. It is the sign of an ill society. When the structures that allow mutual understanding collapse, people no longer share a common language, not just in the lexical sense but in their values, emotions, and intentions. This collapse turns the group from a community into a crowd of isolated speakers. In such contexts, each word becomes a suspect, each utterance a potential betrayal. The consequences are not trivial. Miscommunication becomes the precondition for suspicion, alienation, and conflict. It is the opposite of communion, not just in the religious sense, but in the etymological one: to share, to participate, to be part of a whole. Social theorists have long noted that the failure to communicate is often a symptom of deeper fractures. In families, miscommunication is rarely about syntax or grammar. It is about silences, omissions, and competing realities. In groups, it signals the disintegration of trust and the rise of factions. And in societies, miscommunication grows where narratives multiply, and no single story holds sway. In such a landscape, the danger is not only that people fail to understand each other, but that they no longer expect to. From a philosophical perspective, miscommunication is the breakdown of intersubjectivity. It marks the point at which two people no longer inhabit the same mental or emotional universe. They may speak the same language, but the words fall into a void, stripped of resonance. The speaker intends one thing, the listener receives another, and both remain trapped in the illusion of dialogue. This is not a minor error. It is a structural failure. When repeated at scale, it becomes social pathology. In this sense, miscommunication is more than a barrier; it is a symptom. It reveals how far individuals have drifted from a shared symbolic order. The increase in linguistic complexity, jargon, euphemism, or ideological speech often does not improve clarity but contributes to misalignment. When speech becomes a performance, a defence, or a form of camouflage, then communication ceases to be a tool of communion and becomes a weapon or a wall. Contemporary society is marked by the proliferation of such walls. Information technologies have expanded the quantity of communication while often degrading its quality. Algorithms optimise for engagement, not for truth. News becomes noise, and dialogue fragments into isolated monologues. This is not just a communication crisis; it is a crisis of community. If no one truly listens, and no one frankly speaks, then people do not merely misunderstand one another—they cease to belong to the same symbolic world. The psychological toll of this is profound. Individuals report feelings of being unheard, unseen, and misunderstood not just in their personal relationships but in public life. The loneliness and alienation that follow are not individual failures but collective symptoms. Miscommunication, in this view, is a kind of cultural illness. It spreads not through language alone, but through the erosion of the conditions that make communication meaningful: attention, patience, goodwill, and shared reference. In its most extreme form, miscommunication fuels the machinery of conflict. When words no longer carry stable meanings, intentions are always suspect. In this context, misunderstanding escalates into misjudgement and into violence. A society that cannot

talk to itself eventually breaks apart. The more people talk past each other, the closer they come to treating each other as enemies. Here, the failure to align minds becomes the justification for domination or exclusion. Dialogue gives way to accusation, and the space of common understanding shrinks until only tribal speech remains. To speak of miscommunication, then, is not simply to diagnose a conversational failure. It is to name the weakening of the symbolic tissue that holds groups together. As such, the cure is not simply better phrasing, or clearer speech. It requires a reconstitution of the conditions of communicative life. It demands not only that people mean what they say, but that they want to mean it to someone else—and that there is someone listening who cares to understand.

Dynamics of miscommunication

In 'Talking at Cross-Purposes: The Dynamics of Miscommunication[510]', Angeliki Tzanne examines how misunderstandings emerge, develop, and are managed in everyday talk. Rather than treating miscommunication as a simple breakdown in information exchange, she views it as an evolving, context-dependent interaction between speaker and hearer. The book brings together several strands of research and organises them into a clear account of how miscommunication works. Many earlier studies on miscommunication focused on settings like cross-cultural conversations or clinical interactions, where failure to understand could lead to serious consequences. These studies often centred on the broad causes of misunderstanding, such as differences in language, social norms, or cultural expectations. Tzanne acknowledges this background but moves the discussion toward the turn-by-turn structure of talk itself. Her analysis highlights the conversational dynamics that allow miscommunication to arise even in ordinary, familiar exchanges. A central theme is that miscommunication happens not only when messages are poorly delivered or misheard, but also when they are interpreted differently from how the speaker intended. Much of the confusion lies in mismatched assumptions or frames of reference. These mismatches can occur in sensitive moments—such as openings, requests, or disagreements—where the stakes of interpretation are high. The interactional nature of these points means that meaning is always being negotiated, often in ways that neither party fully controls. Tzanne also tackles the confusion surrounding terminology. Terms like misperception, misinterpretation, or communicative breakdown are often used interchangeably, though they point to different issues. She proposes a distinction: miscommunication refers to the overall phenomenon of message failure, while a misunderstanding is a specific moment where a speaker's intended meaning does not align with what the hearer takes from it. This approach allows for a clearer analysis of how misunderstandings are produced and handled in interaction. Importantly, the book shifts attention away from blame. Misunderstandings are not always the result of error or failure. They may emerge gradually, and participants often become aware of them only after several turns. Sometimes, people even use ambiguity or deliberate vagueness as a way of navigating difficult topics or preserving face. In these cases, the boundary between strategic communication and misunderstanding becomes blurred. Tzanne's work suggests that even though social factors such as cultural background, professional status, or gender can influence communication, they do not determine it entirely. What matters most is the local context in which meaning is created and revised. Speakers and hearers bring their assumptions, intentions, and awareness to the conversation, and the outcome depends on how these elements interact over time. Miscommunication is a natural and inevitable feature of human dialogue. Not a bug to fix but a diagnostic trace of how people negotiate meaning under uncertainty.

[510] Tzanne, A. (2000) Talking at Cross-Purposes: The Dynamics of Miscommunication. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Theories of mass communication should begin there, abandoning utopian myths of perfect clarity or a lost universal tongue that mask how standardized languages have long served coordination but also deception, manipulation, and population control. Thus, mass miscommunication is both the predictable outcome and the only honest point of departure for our field.

Creation of linguistic miscommunication

In 'An essay on the organisation of experience[511]' Erving Goffman show that misunderstanding is not a simple mistake, but a product of the interactive process through which meaning is shaped. It is not enough to look at individual phrases or isolated errors. What matters is the dynamic context in which utterances occur and the interpretive assumptions both speakers and listeners bring to each turn in a conversation. Rather than treating miscommunication as something that happens in a vacuum, the study considers how language operates on multiple levels. There is the literal content of what is said, and there is the force behind it—the social intention, the emotional tone, or the role it plays in structuring talk. Speakers may mean to inform, criticise, request, or tease, and listeners must figure out both what the speaker is saying and why they are saying it. Miscommunication often emerges when these levels are not aligned or when the hearer misreads either one. One common source of confusion lies in the use of ambiguous references. Words like 'this', 'that', or 'it' depend heavily on context. If the hearer misidentifies the referent, the conversation may take an entirely different direction. People tend to rely on what was just said to resolve these ambiguities, which can be misleading if the speaker had something else in mind. This shows how misunderstanding is often created not through error alone, but through normal interpretive habits. Another factor is topic management. When speakers shift topics or change roles without clearly signalling it, listeners may continue to interpret new utterances through the lens of the previous subject. This results in responses that appear off-track, even though they make sense from the listener's perspective. In these cases, neither participant is necessarily at fault. The misunderstanding grows out of the way meaning is constructed incrementally and contextually. Miscommunication can also result from how speakers manage interpersonal dynamics. Sometimes, people deliberately speak vaguely or indirectly to soften a blow, avoid confrontation, or save face. These face-saving strategies can themselves lead to misunderstanding, especially if the hearer takes the words at face value. In such moments, language functions both as a tool for communication and as a shield against vulnerability or conflict. Finally, the process of repair—the attempt to fix a misunderstanding—is rarely straightforward. It often involves several steps, and the repair itself can be shaped by social roles and power relationships. In workplace or institutional settings, for example, less powerful participants may pretend not to understand to resist authority without open defiance. This perspective shifts the focus away from blaming individuals for communication failures and toward understanding how linguistic and social factors interact to create meaning. Miscommunication is best seen not as a breakdown, but as part of the normal flow of human interaction, where interpretation is always in flux.

[511] Goffman, E. (1974). Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience. [online] psycnet.apa.org. Available at: https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1975-09476-000.

Dynamics of disordered dialogue

In their article 'The Dynamics of Disordered Dialogue[512]', David A. Kupferschmidt and Joshua A. Gordon explore how deficits in spatial working memory (SWM), a central symptom of schizophrenia, arise from disrupted communication between key brain regions. The prefrontal cortex (PFC), hippocampus, and thalamus form a functional circuit crucial for holding and manipulating short-term information. When the timing or quality of communication among these areas breaks down, working memory perish, contributing to the broader cognitive difficulties seen in schizophrenia. The hippocampus and PFC work together to support memory tasks that involve space and time. In rodent models, researchers have shown that these regions synchronise their activity using theta and gamma oscillations. These brain waves help coordinate information flow during decision-making. For instance, during tasks that ask a rodent to remember a spatial cue, theta rhythms from the hippocampus can lock into the firing of neurons in the medial PFC, aligning both regions for accurate choices. This cross-regional alignment seems necessary for encoding and maintaining spatial details. However, this coordination is fragile in schizophrenia. Patients often show weaker connectivity between the hippocampus and PFC, and this is mirrored in rodent models of the disease. Mice genetically engineered to carry risk variants, such as deletions like those found in human 22q11.2 microdeletion syndrome, display poor theta synchrony and struggle with memory tasks. Techniques like optogenetics—which allow scientists to turn off specific neural pathways—have confirmed that interfering with hippocampal signals to the PFC during memory formation leads to performance failures. The thalamus, and particularly its mediodorsal (MD) nucleus, plays another key role. It forms dense connections with the PFC and appears to serve as a switchboard that manages the flow of information. During the memory delay phase, the MD sends inputs to the PFC, helping maintain information. Later, when it is time to act on what was remembered, this flow reverses, with the PFC sending top-down signals back to the thalamus. This bidirectional exchange supports the different stages of memory processing. In schizophrenia, this balance is off. Imaging studies show that the white matter tracts connecting the thalamus and PFC are often degraded in patients, resulting in weaker prefrontal activation and reduced working memory performance. Rodent models using NMDA receptor blockers like ketamine simulate this disconnect, showing disordered oscillatory rhythms and impaired task outcomes. While not all models agree on the precise mechanisms, the evidence points to disrupted timing and coherence in these communication loops as a central issue. Kupferschmidt and Gordon emphasise that future research should continue to investigate how these brain regions coordinate across time and frequency bands. Using refined tools like closed-loop optogenetics and simultaneous recordings across multiple regions could help identify specific patterns of failure. Understanding these network dynamics may eventually allow for targeted treatments that restore proper synchrony and improve cognitive function in those living with schizophrenia.

[512] Kupferschmidt, D.A. and Gordon, J.A. (2018). The dynamics of disordered dialogue: Prefrontal, hippocampal and thalamic miscommunication underlying working memory deficits in schizophrenia. Brain and Neuroscience Advances, 2, p.239821281877182. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/2398212818771821.

The miscommunication of deception

In their experimental study 'The miscommunication of deception[513]', Charles F. Bond, Karen Nelson Kahler, and Lucia M. Paolicelli investigate how humans deceive and how that deception is perceived. Their research shows that miscommunication in deception often stems not from a failure to detect lies, but from how deception is performed and interpreted. People tend to rely on visible cues, such as demeanour, to judge honesty. But these same cues are frequently manipulated by liars, resulting in a mismatch between perception and reality. The researchers asked college students to talk about their last job, either truthfully or deceptively, while being videotaped. Later, these recordings were shown to other students, who tried to determine who was lying. Incentives were offered both for successful lying and for correctly identifying lies. The findings revealed a strong bias: some people simply appeared more honest, whether they were telling the truth. Those who gave off an 'honest' impression were more often believed, even when lying. On the other hand, some people looked untrustworthy even when they were telling the truth. This demeanour bias had a stronger effect on judgment than any real ability to detect lies. Interestingly, liars in the study often used more eye contact, hand gestures, and fewer speech hesitations—behaviours that are usually associated with honesty. These deceptive signals often fooled observers. As the authors note, these behaviours do not reliably indicate truth or lies; they simply reflect the liar's skill in crafting a believable image. Some participants even judged others more harshly because they themselves looked honest, projecting their internal sense of trust onto others' appearances. Drawing on evolutionary theory, the authors compare human deception to animal strategies like camouflage or mimicry. Just as certain traits improve survival in the animal kingdom, the ability to deceive effectively may have been rewarded in human evolution. Over time, individuals who were good at lying may have had an advantage in social situations, passing down their skills—directly or indirectly—through generations. This arms race between deception and detection means that the average person may be far better at lying than spotting lies. The experiment also revealed that the order in which people lied or told the truth affected judgments. When participants lied after telling the truth, their lies were harder to detect. This suggests that once someone builds trust, they can exploit that trust to deceive more effectively. Liars benefit not only from how they act in the moment but from the credibility they build over time. The study shows that lying is not simply a matter of saying something false. It involves using body language, tone, and timing to shape how others perceive the lie. This can lead to systematic miscommunication, especially when observers rely on superficial cues. The authors argue that liars learn to refine their skills through success, while those who try to detect lies often rely on flawed strategies that go uncorrected. In the theatre of conversation, liars play on a well-lit stage, while truth-tellers stumble in the dark with broken scripts.

Handbook of deceptive communication

In 'The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication[514]', edited by Tony Docan-Morgan, the chapters by Matthew S. McGlone and Mark L. Knapp, and by Darrin J. Griffin and Christian Bender, trace how deception has been understood and practiced across different times and cultures. The history of lying is not just about identifying falsehoods but about how societies respond to and rationalise deception. McGlone and Knapp begin by outlining how

[513] Bond, C. F., Kahler, K. N. and Paolicelli, L. M. (2001) 'The miscommunication of deception: An adaptive perspective', Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80(5), pp. 768–779.
[514] Docan-Morgan, T. (ed.) (2019) The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

ancient societies viewed lying as both dangerous and inevitable. Texts from India, China, and Greece reveal that physical signs—like appetite changes or shifts in behaviour—were used to detect deception. Religion also played a role. Truth-telling was often enforced through spiritual or physical ordeals, as lying was seen as both a moral and existential threat. With the Renaissance came a shift. Courts and inquisitors turned to more systematic methods. Legal procedures developed that aimed to test credibility through questioning and logic. In politics, deception became more accepted. Machiavelli argued that rulers needed to lie to survive, while others stressed maintaining an honest image in public. Deception, in this view, was not a moral failing but a necessary skill. The Enlightenment and early modern science added new tools to the study of lies. Psychology and physiology led to the polygraph, an early attempt to link bodily responses with truth. At the same time, new philosophical ideas challenged the very notion of absolute truth. As thinkers became more sceptical, the idea of a clear line between true and false became harder to define. More recently, cultural, and technological changes have made deception even more complex. Political scandals, fake news, and digital manipulation have blurred the boundaries between reality and appearance. Today, deception research focuses on how lies are created, interpreted, and socially understood. Scholars study facial expressions, speech patterns, and digital behaviour. But the core challenge remains the same: understanding how people decide when and how to lie. Griffin and Bender take this further by examining deception across cultures. They define culture as a shared system of signs and values. In some cultures, lying to preserve harmony is expected. In others, direct truth is more valued. These cultural differences influence how people lie and how others interpret those lies. Factors like individualism versus collectivism shape motives. In collectivist cultures, people may lie to protect the group. In individualist ones, lies might serve personal goals. Stakes also vary. Small lies, or 'white lies', are common everywhere, but what counts as acceptable varies. Children learn these norms early, and their understanding of lying is shaped by culture. Cultural context also affects how deception is communicated—whether through face-to-face interaction or digital platforms. People often choose less permanent channels, like casual messages, when trying to deceive. Still, across cultures, people often assume honesty, making them vulnerable to skilled liars. These chapters show that deception is not just a personal act but a social and cultural phenomenon. It reflects what societies value, what they fear, and how they navigate trust and power. In most societies, the cohesion of the community rests less on the open exchange of truths than on the cultivated art of deception, which serves as a unifying linguistic and cultural foundation. Society is a carefully maintained fiction, sustained by the collective agreement to treat its lies as truth.

Deceptive speech

In their analysis 'Deception and Language[515]', David M. Markowitz and Jeffrey T. Hancock argue that the connection between lying, and linguistic expression is far from straightforward. Their proposed Contextual Organisation of Language and Deception (COLD) framework aims to clarify how different factors influence deceptive communication. Instead of assuming that lies leave behind universal language cues, the COLD framework points to context as the decisive element. Deception, they argue, alters language, but the form and extent of this change depend heavily on surrounding circumstances. Deceptive speech often reflects the speaker's psychological state. People under stress or trying to manage impressions may use

[515] Markowitz, D.M. and Hancock, J.T. (2020) 'Deception and language: The contextual organization of language and deception (COLD) framework', in Docan-Morgan, T. (ed.) The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 233–255.

words differently. Yet, studies have shown contradictory findings. In one case, liars use fewer self-references when discussing emotionally charged topics. In another, fake reviewers use more self-references to appear authentic. These inconsistencies are not flaws in research but indicators of how language adapts based on context. It is not simply that lying changes language; it is that lies are told for different reasons, in different ways, to different audiences. Research supports that language reflects mental states. Depressed individuals write with more negative emotion words. Students who write analytically perform better academically. Deception operates similarly, but the effects are less consistent. Meta-analyses show only moderate linguistic shifts when people lie, and these vary depending on factors such as communication medium, motivation to deceive, and genre. For instance, in face-to-face interviews, liars tend to use fewer words. Online, however, they often use more, to appear more credible. Markowitz and Hancock integrate existing theories like Truth-Default Theory and Interpersonal Deception Theory into their model. Truth-Default Theory suggests that people usually assume others are telling the truth. That bias means lies often go undetected unless something disrupts the assumption—like conflicting evidence or a known motive to lie. Interpersonal Deception Theory adds that social relationships play a role. Familiarity, interaction type, and power dynamics all affect how lies are delivered and received. The COLD framework outlines three main contextual forces: psychological dynamics, pragmatic goals, and genre conventions. Psychological dynamics refer to the speaker's mental state—are they anxious, confident, or under pressure? This can affect how much emotion, or cognitive effort appears in the message. Pragmatic goals relate to the liar's purpose—are they lying to protect themselves, influence policy, or conceal failure? Each goal shapes the tone and content. Finally, genre conventions—rules that govern communication styles—also matter. A lie in a formal email will not look the same as one in a casual text. To illustrate this, the authors examine political lies told by US Presidents. Lies told for policy reasons (e.g., Lyndon Johnson or George W. Bush) often contain fewer self-references and more negative emotion terms. In contrast, lies to cover personal embarrassment (e.g., from Bill Clinton or Richard Nixon) show the opposite pattern. These findings demonstrate that context, not deception alone, dictates linguistic patterns. Deception is not a fixed linguistic fingerprint but a flexible adaptation to the needs of the moment.

Corruption of communication

In 'On the Corruption of Communication: A Theory of Deception[516]' Bambang Sukma Wijaya focuses on how the process of sharing information can be intentionally distorted. His central idea is that corruption in communication happens when messages are shaped not to reveal the truth, but to serve personal or group interests. This kind of manipulation can affect what is said, how it is delivered, in what setting it occurs, and the ethics of the speaker's behaviour. The act of communication is rooted in human needs—people speak to survive, connect, and achieve goals. But because language holds power, it can also be used to mislead. Political figures, for example, might produce misleading slogans to influence public opinion, while corporations can issue false statements that risk public safety. These are not just examples of poor communication, but forms of deception that erode the audience's right to truth. Wijaya breaks communication corruption into four main categories. The first is the message itself. Language is often altered to hide or distort facts. Whether through disinformation, fake news,

[516] Wijaya, B.S. (2020) 'On the Corruption of Communication: A Theory of Deception', in Docan-Morgan, T. (ed.) The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 79–99.

or selectively edited content, these distortions are crafted to influence thought and action. Such corruption does not just mislead—it rewrites reality. The second is media corruption. This occurs both on an individual level and within entire institutions. Journalists with conflicts of interest may slant a story, but more dangerous is systemic manipulation. When powerful actors control media platforms, news becomes a tool for shaping public narratives, often at the cost of accuracy. Third, Wijaya examines how communicative context can be corrupted. The context includes physical, social, and cultural elements that give meaning to language. When politicians stage events or curate specific settings to build false impressions, they are not just manipulating facts—they are manufacturing reality. The audience interprets the message within that context, and if it is manipulated, so is understanding. The fourth form of corruption is behavioural. Communicators may act unethically—through plagiarism, bribery, or impersonation—to deceive an audience. These behaviours often go unnoticed, but their impact is significant. They help establish false authority, shape public opinion, and mask wrongdoing under a facade of credibility. To describe how these elements work together, Wijaya proposes a formula: Communication corruption increases with higher needs, power, and opportunity , and decreases with stronger audience rights , conscience , and moral responsibility. In simple terms, the more power and motivation a speaker must deceive—and the fewer moral constraints or audience protections in place—the more likely corruption will occur. At its core, this theory links deception directly to communicative behaviour. Lies, omissions, and distortions are all strategies for corrupting meaning. From political campaigns to advertising, deception is often embedded in public discourse, subtly reshaping what audiences believe. Understanding these dynamics is essential. Communication corruption is not only about lying—it is about systematically weakening the structures that allow people to seek and share the truth.

Not all lies are spontaneous

In the study 'Not All Lies Are Spontaneous: An Examination of Deception Across Different Modes of Communication[517]', Monica T. Whitty and her colleagues explore how people lie across different forms of communication. Using an online diary method, the team gathered insights from 104 participants, seventy-six of whom kept daily diaries over the course of a week. These diaries recorded when lies occurred, the nature of each lie, its level of planning, its seriousness, and the communication channel used. The researchers found that people were most likely to lie during telephone conversations. About 13% of phone interactions involved deception, compared to 8% in face-to-face exchanges. Lies were less common in text-based digital media like email, instant messaging, and social media. These results align with what is called the feature-based model. This model predicts that certain features of communication—like how fast a conversation happens, whether it is recorded, and whether messages reach many people at once—affect how likely people are to lie. A second important finding was that not all lies are spontaneous. While many lies happened on the spot, a large number—especially those in text messages—were premeditated. These planned lies tended to be more serious. The time delay offered by asynchronous media like SMS gave participants space to craft more deliberate, calculated deceptions. Another pattern involved the purpose of lying. Most lies were self-serving. People lied to protect themselves, boost their image, or avoid trouble. Interestingly, participants reported telling more lies to people to whom they were close. This may seem counterintuitive, but researchers suggest that people lie more in close relationships because they

[517] Whitty, M.T., Buchanan, T., Joinson, A.N. and Meredith, A. (2012) 'Not All Lies Are Spontaneous: An Examination of Deception Across Different Modes of Communication', The Palgrave Handbook of Deceptive Communication, ed. T. Docan-Morgan. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 303–322.

care about maintaining harmony or avoiding conflict. At the same time, participants also admitted to lying to strangers, likely because they felt less accountability and assumed they would never meet them again. The research evaluated predictions from three different theories: social distance theory, media richness theory, and the feature-based model. While social distance theory suggests people are more honest in close relationships, and media richness theory emphasises the ability of a channel to convey nuance, the feature-based model provided the best explanation overall. Still, the study showed that this model could benefit from updates—especially in distinguishing between planned and spontaneous lies and recognising that instant messaging, though digital, can function like real-time conversation. The study offers a nuanced view of deception. The mode of communication matters. Phone calls invite more deception than text, and asynchronous formats allow for greater planning. People lie to serve their own interests more than to help others, and relationships—whether close or distant—shape how and when lies are told. As miscommunication continues to evolve, particularly through digital channels, these findings open the door for further study of how technology influences the nature of deception. The paradox is that the most reliable knowledge about language comes from studying its failures—deception and miscommunication—rather than its ideal forms. Like medicine's maxim "First, do no harm," the study of mass miscommunication should aim not at perfecting speech, but at understanding and mitigating its inevitable distortions.

Accepting the Miscommunication Axiom

The paradigm of miscommunication treats misunderstanding as an inherent condition of communication, beyond the need for empirical proof. The miscommunication axiom is not a mathematical theorem to be proven or disproven, but a paradigm—a way of thinking that individuals or groups may accept or reject. Unlike scientific postulates tested by experiment, such an axiom functions as a conceptual lens, framing how one understands the inevitability of misunderstanding in human interaction. It holds that as population and linguistic complexity grow, so too does semantic entropy, amplifying confusion and reducing clarity. Its validity depends not on empirical proof but on whether people find it a compelling description of reality. As with Paul Watzlawick's axioms, it serves as a foundational truth for those who adopt it, shaping how they interpret communication in complex, fragmented societies. Language evolves through the principle of difference: every new word, rule, or meaning must distinguish itself from what came before. A is A precisely because it is not B; novelty depends on contrast. Meanings evolve with context, power, and bias, often privileging one side of a binary. This instability ensures that understanding is provisional, and interpretation remains a continual process, where every definition is haunted by the shadow of its opposite. Each term carries a trace of what it excludes—present yet absent, shaped by history but understood in the present. Jacques Derrida's concept of 'différance' captures this dynamic—meaning emerges through both differing from and deferring to other signs, never fixed but always in flux. Languages, cultures, religions, identities, and nations live by the same law as words: they are what they are because they are not something else. French is not German, Islam is not Christianity, the Republic is not the Empire. Every collective identity carries the ghost of its opposite, a shadow that shapes its form and gives it meaning. Meaning is born in the gap, always deferred, never fully captured. History reshuffles these contrasts: the enemy becomes an ally, the heresy becomes a tradition, the border shifts but still marks a line between "us" and "them." Dominance creeps into the hierarchy, making one side seem pure, original, superior, while the other is cast as derivative or impure. Yet without its opposite, no identity can survive; its self-image needs a foil. Nations tell myths not just of who they are, but of who they are not. Languages coin words to name the foreign, the strange, the other. And so the trace remains—

an invisible watermark running through every anthem, prayer, and proverb—reminding us that what we call “ours” is inseparable from what we exclude, and that identity is never more than a story told against its own shadow. This constant push for linguistic innovation ensures vitality, but it also generates an inevitable phase of obfuscation. New forms disrupt the stability of shared meaning until they are adopted as part of the accepted system. Thus, the very process that drives language forward—creating distinctions—also guarantees miscommunication during transition. In mass communication, this principle operates at scale: to keep language alive, the old must be unsettled, renamed, and reframed. Novelty thrives on the temporary breakdown of clarity, turning misunderstanding into a bridge toward future consensus. In this sense, miscommunication is not a flaw but the engine of linguistic evolution, the unavoidable turbulence through which new meanings are born. To innovate in language is to destabilize the known, to obscure the familiar just enough for something different to emerge—and in doing so, to accept that confusion is the price of renewal. What follows the decay of language? Novelty and the revitalisation of language (and culture) demand obfuscation at any price, even if it means embracing shallowness, absurdity, and broken logic. What seems like decay in clarity is often the fertile confusion from which new meanings, forms, and identities take root.

3. OBFUSCATION

3.1. Gramaticalisation

(From speech to structure: The drift of grammatical meaning)

'Grammaticalisation involves not just simplification but the sedimentation of discourse history into structure'.

— Joan Bybee, Language, Usage and Cognition

'The history of grammatical structures is the history of expressive forms fading into background noise'.

— Bernd Heine & Tania Kuteva, The Genesis of Grammar

Grammaticalisation

Grammaticalisation is the process by which words that originally had concrete, lexical meanings gradually change into words with abstract, grammatical functions. This phenomenon explains how languages evolve over time, not through the invention of new grammatical forms from scratch, but by transforming existing words into new roles. For example, the Old English verb willan, meaning 'to want' or 'to wish', has shifted into the modern auxiliary verb will, which expresses future intention. Over time, many such transitions have taken place, turning nouns and verbs into prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliaries, case markers, or inflectional suffixes. Grammaticalisation reveals how flexible language is. Words are not static; they shift in meaning and function as speakers find more efficient ways to express complex relationships. A good example is the phrase let us, which becomes let us in modern usage. This change reduces and simplifies the original phrase, and the meaning also shifts from an expression of permission to a kind of informal suggestion. The pronoun us is eventually absorbed into a suffix, and the phrase becomes a new grammatical item with a different role in the sentence. The process usually moves from specific to general, from content to function, from meaning to form. This

is the principle of unidirectionality, a key concept in Grammaticalisation theory. However, this process does not happen all at once. It unfolds in stages and involves changes on multiple levels—semantic, morphological, and phonetic. For instance, semantic bleaching is when a word loses much of its original meaning. Phonetic erosion reduces the sound structure of a word. Morphological reduction simplifies word forms, and obligatorification makes a word or structure more necessary in each context. Over time, these shifts turn a fully independent word into a grammatical tool. The history of grammaticalisation as a concept can be traced back to early nineteenth-century linguists like Wilhelm von Humboldt and Antoine Meillet. Humboldt saw language as evolving from concrete to abstract forms. Meillet later formalised the term 'grammaticalisation' and defined it as the assignment of grammatical function to a word that was once autonomous. In the twentieth century, interest in grammaticalisation waned due to a focus on synchronic analysis. But in the 1970s, the topic regained attention. Scholars like Christian Lehmann and Bernd Heine brought fresh insights and methods. Lehmann introduced a set of parameters to measure the extent and nature of grammatical change. Grammaticalisation is often thought to be a one-way street. However, a few counterexamples—known as degrammaticalisation—challenge this view. These are rare cases where a grammatical form seems to return to a more lexical role. One example is the English possessive 's', which has shifted from a suffix to something closer to a clitic. Another is seen in the development of auxiliary verbs in regional dialects, where a grammatical marker may regain independent meaning and function. Though such cases are exceptional, they remind linguists that language change is not always linear. There are also competing definitions and frameworks for understanding grammaticalisation. Some linguists, like Paul Hopper, have outlined principles such as layering, divergence, and persistence, which describe how older and newer forms coexist and evolve. Others, like František Lichtenberk and Elizabeth Traugott, view the process in terms of syntactic and semantic shifts. Still others focus on the tension between lexicon and grammar, or between form and function. Despite these different approaches, most scholars agree on the core idea: grammaticalisation is a historical process where words shift from concrete meanings to abstract grammatical roles. It is one of the key mechanisms through which languages change and adapt. Some argue that the process reflects a natural drive in language to become more efficient and expressive. Understanding grammaticalisation not only sheds light on the structure of language, but also on the way humans shape meaning over time. As people reuse and reinterpret words, language systems adapt, incorporating new forms and retiring old ones. This dynamic cycle ensures that language remains both stable enough to communicate and flexible enough to evolve. Grammaticalisation is not just a technical concept. It helps explain how languages grow, simplify, and complexify in unexpected ways. From the shift of verbs into auxiliaries to the transformation of case markers into postpositions, grammaticalisation gives a window into how humans repurpose old tools to meet new communicative needs. It reveals the creativity and economy behind everyday speech, and it challenges the idea that grammar is fixed or static. Instead, grammar is a living system, always in motion. Language does not simply reflect the world—it is shaped by use, and grammaticalisation is one of the most powerful ways that use leaves its mark.

Abstraction of language

As language scales up from intimate contexts to large, impersonal collectives, it does not simply grow—it transforms. The process of grammaticalisation, often described in neutral technical terms, hides within it a deeper historical tendency: the abstraction and depersonalisation of speech in proportion to the size and complexity of the social group. What begins as direct, grounded, and experiential language—rooted in shared bodily and emotional

life—gradually becomes more abstract, generalised, and distant. This drift is not accidental. It follows a structural logic, like gravity pulling language upward from the living earth of human interaction into the cold air of systemic control. Grammaticalisation refers to the process by which content words—nouns and verbs with specific, sensory meaning—evolve into grammatical markers. A word like go becomes part of the auxiliary phrase going to, which in turn becomes gonna, no longer referring to actual movement but to future intent. Over time, verbs of action, nouns of substance, or phrases of emotional intensity are emptied of their concrete content and repurposed to serve grammatical functions. This shift is not merely linguistic but deeply social. As groups grow, language adapts to manage scale. It becomes less about sharing meaning between people and more about managing populations. In small-scale societies, language tends to be direct, rooted in face-to-face interaction, shared knowledge, and embodied experience. Pronouns refer to people physically present. Verbs align with visible actions. Grammar is simple because redundancy is unnecessary. The speaker and listener live in proximity; misunderstanding can be corrected on the spot. There is no need for elaborate markers of tense, modality, or agreement because the context is shared. But as societies expand, context is lost. Communication must now travel across space and time, from strangers to strangers. In this transition, grammar steps in as a substitute for shared life. Grammaticalisation is the linguistic response to this loss. It compensates for the absence of shared meaning by introducing increasingly formal structures. Instead of pointing or gesturing, speakers must now encode spatial, temporal, and social information directly into their speech. Language becomes bureaucratic. Tense systems, modal verbs, case endings, and agreement rules evolve to manage ambiguity, impersonality, and distance. These tools are necessary when communication becomes less about understanding and more about organising, commanding, and categorising. Grammar becomes the skeleton of speech—rigid, repetitive, and optimised for scale. The parallels with large-scale insect societies are striking. In ant colonies or termite mounds, communication is not about individual meaning but about signalling, coordination, and role differentiation. Each signal must be processed by thousands, even millions, of others. Precision, abstraction, and standardisation become the conditions of survival. Language, in mass societies, becomes less about communion and more about instruction. This is especially evident in the rise of formalised bureaucratic languages, legal codes, religious texts, and standardised education systems. These forms of language are heavily grammaticalised, filled with auxiliaries, passive constructions, and nominalisations. They are optimised not for expression, but for control. Grammaticalisation, then, is not a neutral process. It reveals the tendency of language to shift away from life as it scales. It creates distance—not just between speaker and listener, but between word and world. A word like must, once expressive of inner necessity, becomes a modal of obligation. The personal becomes impersonal. The command replaces the desire. The increase in grammatical forms maps the increase in alienation between language and life. The very structure of speech begins to encode hierarchy, discipline, and control. This trajectory leads to a kind of linguistic entropy: as words become more abstract, their referential power weakens. Speech fills with empty forms. Grammatical markers multiply but meaning thins. What was once spoken to share a world becomes a system for sorting bodies, managing behaviour, and enforcing norms. The abstraction of grammar mirrors the abstraction of social life in large societies. People become roles; speech becomes protocol. Such a view does not deny the utility of grammar. It recognises its historical function. But it also asks whether language, in its most evolved grammatical forms, serves people—or whether it begins to serve institutions, systems, and powers that require linguistic conformity. The transformation of words into grammatical tools reflects the transformation of individuals into subjects. Grammaticalisation becomes a political process masked as linguistic evolution. In the end,

grammaticalisation is not just a linguistic curiosity. It is a symptom of a deeper transformation in human life. As people grow distant from one another, as societies become too large for direct communion, language adapts by becoming less human and more mechanical. It sheds its skin of intimacy and puts on the armour of abstraction. What begins as a way of speaking ends as a way of ruling. This is the dark side of grammaticalisation: the erosion of speech as shared meaning, and the rise of speech as system. It is not just a path of linguistic change, but a sign of civilisational drift—from understanding to administration, from dialogue to directive, from conversation to command. The abstraction of language starts from intimacy and ends in mass confusion.

Grammar as a stabiliser in communication

Grammaticalisation describes how certain linguistic expressions gradually lose their original meaning and become fixed grammatical elements within a language. In 'Ten Lectures on Grammaticalisation[518]' Christian Lehmann explains that this is not a sudden shift, but a process shaped by usage, repetition, and social interaction. What starts as a flexible phrase or word eventually becomes rigid, bound by the internal rules of grammar. For instance, in English, the verb 'have' once meant 'to possess', but it later transformed into a grammatical auxiliary that helps express the perfect tense, as in 'I have eaten'. This shift reflects a broader pattern: elements that were once expressive and optional become obligatory parts of a language's grammatical structure. The process affects not just individual words but entire constructions. Lehmann highlights how phrases like 'have + past participle' solidify into paradigms. In this way, grammaticalisation is not just about individual lexemes becoming auxiliaries or suffixes. It is about entire constructions being absorbed into the system of a language until they behave like fixed grammatical rules. This kind of structural entrenchment can be observed in many world languages and is a cornerstone of linguistic change. Although some have questioned whether grammaticalisation counts as a proper linguistic theory, Lehmann argues that it provides a clear and practical model for understanding language variation and development. The process is visible in every known language, and its mechanisms—semantic reduction, formal erosion, and structural fixation—are remarkably consistent. Even though the terminology varies—some prefer 'grammaticisation' to avoid confusion—its conceptual foundation remains widely accepted. One of the clearest examples is the phrase 'be going to', originally a movement construction. Over time, it became a way to express future intent. As the phrase was used more frequently for predictions rather than describing motion, its meaning shifted. Eventually, it lost all sense of physical movement, becoming part of a grammatical structure. In spoken English, this form evolved further into 'gonna', reflecting phonetic erosion, another hallmark of grammaticalisation. This shows how language changes both semantically and formally, as concrete meaning fades and form contracts. Similar shifts can be seen in how demonstratives become articles, or how the numeral 'one' evolves into an indefinite article in many languages. Even spatial expressions—such as those used to describe location—can turn into grammatical markers of aspect. These are not isolated cases. They follow a cross-linguistic pattern, showing that grammaticalisation is not random but driven by regular pressures in language use. Lehmann outlines how grammaticalisation usually unfolds in two stages. First, a syntactic phrase starts to play a grammatical role. Then, over time, this phrase becomes fully absorbed into the language's morphology. In the process, the original meanings of the components fade, their forms erode, and the construction becomes fixed. This evolution increases redundancy in language, reducing

[518] Lehmann, C. (2015) Ten Lectures on Grammaticalization. Leiden: Brill.

ambiguity and minimising the need for listeners to infer context. Grammar thus acts as a stabiliser in communication, and grammaticalisation is one of the mechanisms through which this stability is achieved. While rare, there are some counterexamples, known as degrammaticalisation, where grammatical elements revert to lexical use. These are exceptions and usually arise in highly creative or non-standard forms of speech. Most often, the process of grammaticalisation moves in one direction—from free and meaningful to bound and functional. In sum, grammaticalisation illustrates how language adapts to the needs of communication. It turns phrases that once carried specific meaning into structures that serve broader grammatical functions. This process reflects a deeper tendency in human language: the shift from the expressive to the systemic is one of the most powerful forces shaping language evolution.

Patterns of linguistic change

Grammaticalisation has become central to understanding how languages evolve, especially within typology and functional linguistics. Over the past thirty years, research in this area has shown that languages do not change arbitrarily but follow regular paths shaped by cognitive and communicative patterns. The 'Trends in Linguistics[519]' volume, dedicated to Christian Lehmann, brings together studies that explore the nature of grammaticalisation, the structure of grammatical change, and the limits of directionality. The contributions demonstrate how certain expressions lose their independence and become embedded in the grammatical system of a language. At its core, grammaticalisation involves a linguistic unit losing its flexibility and autonomy in both paradigmatic and syntagmatic roles. This happens gradually. Parameters such as integrity, variability, scope, and obligatoriness shift, leading to the semantic fading of a word and its phonological reduction. For example, a word that once carried rich meaning can become a fixed grammatical marker, narrowing its function and making its use obligatory. Syntagmatic changes like fusion and fixation also contribute, turning free combinations into tightly bound structures. The process often begins with a choice among lexical options to fill a grammatical role. In languages like Korean and Maltese, full verbs start to act as grammatical auxiliaries. In Japanese, honorific markers have undergone similar shifts, developing new speaker-oriented meanings. These examples reflect broader, cross-linguistic tendencies. Though each language follows its path, certain patterns—such as full verbs turning into auxiliaries or nouns becoming articles—are seen repeatedly around the world. One key topic in the volume is the directionality of grammaticalisation. Most research supports the idea that change flows in one direction: from lexical to grammatical, from flexible to fixed. Reversal of this process, known as degrammaticalisation, is rare. The volume presents examples like English's genitives becoming a clitic, or expressions in Russian shifting toward wider usage. Still, these cases do not challenge the general tendency that grammaticalisation moves toward reduction, fixation, and regularisation. The shift is not random—it is guided by communicative economy and structural pressures. A particularly interesting contribution comes from Elena Maslova, who offers an evolutionary view. She argues that language change must be understood through both mutation and selection. Mutations, or small changes in usage, happen at the level of individual speakers. But selection—what gets picked up by a wider community—determines which changes survive. According to Maslova, range-expanding mutations, which make a form usable in more contexts, are more noticeable and thus more likely to spread. In contrast, range-reducing changes are harder to detect and often remain isolated. The book is organised into four parts. The first explores foundational issues like directionality and cycles. The second examines

[519] Bisang, W. & Hock, H. H. (eds) (2006) Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs 205. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

noun phrases and prepositions, while the third focuses on verbs and agreement. The final section connects grammaticalisation to larger constructions, including modal particles and social hierarchies. Across these topics, a shared theme emerges: grammaticalisation is not a chaotic process but a structured transformation, deeply rooted in human interaction. This research shows that grammaticalisation is a powerful framework for analysing how grammar changes over time. It reveals how everyday usage and social dynamics shape the rules that structure language. Despite occasional reversals, the overall movement is toward simplification, regularisation, and increased integration into the system. It is this process that helps languages remain stable and efficient across generations. While such processes preserve the stability of languages, for individuals they often serve to obscure and erode genuine human connection, serving primarily societal goals.

Rethinking grammaticalisation

Grammaticalisation is often viewed as a process that brings order to language by transforming lexical elements into grammatical ones. But Livio Gaeta's chapter 'Rethinking Grammaticalisation: New Perspectives[520]' offers a different view. He argues that grammaticalisation can distort grammar by creating mismatches between form and meaning. These mismatches challenge the regularity of a language and often result from historical layering, incomplete change, or outside influence. Instead of producing a smooth transition, grammaticalisation sometimes leaves behind inconsistencies that resist full integration into the language system. Mismatch, in this context, refers to a disconnect between how a form looks and what it is expected to mean or do. As grammaticalisation processes evolve, they can generate constructions that no longer align with a language's core patterns. Gaeta shows that these mismatches are not just historical remnants but active signs of ongoing change. In Latin, for instance, forms like -dam and -pse attached to pronouns created combinations that clashed with expected patterns of agreement. In Basque, a new progressive form introduced a split in syntactic alignment, changing how verbs related to subjects and objects. These examples show that grammaticalisation does not always unify or simplify grammar. It can also introduce irregularities. A common source of mismatch is what Gaeta calls the 'unchanged residue' of grammaticalisation. These are parts of the language where the process did not complete its work. Sometimes inertia prevents change from reaching every part of a paradigm. In Germanic languages, weak and strong verb inflections coexist because grammaticalisation stalled before resolving the older forms. In other cases, grammatical rules block further extension. A construction may be grammatically useful in one context but excluded in another because of overarching constraints. This leaves behind patchy systems, full of exceptions and partial forms. Another way mismatches arise is through external influence. Language contact can interfere with the natural trajectory of grammaticalisation. Khmer, for example, did not develop a full system of morphological marking partly because of contact with Thai and Vietnamese. Meanwhile, Vietnamese, shaped by Chinese, developed structures like right-headedness that clash with earlier syntactic expectations. These shifts show that languages are not closed systems. External pressures can redirect the evolution of grammar, introducing mismatches that would not arise internally. Gaeta also discusses mismatches in German that stem from verb phrase constructions. In the perfect tense, modal verbs block the use of the past participle. This creates a surface-level inconsistency that reflects a deeper, incomplete grammaticalisation process. What looks like a quirk in the system is a trace of diachronic change still in progress.

[520] Gaeta, L. (2012) 'Mismatch: Grammar Distortion and Grammaticalization', in López-Couso, M. J. and Seoane, E. (eds) Rethinking Grammaticalization: New Perspectives. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

In the end, Gaeta's contribution highlights a central insight: grammaticalisation is not a clean or predictable process. It interacts with structural constraints, social dynamics, and historical residue. Mismatches are not errors—they are part of how languages change. Understanding them can reveal the underlying forces that shape grammar over time.

Future in language, the present in mind

In 'The Grammaticalisation of the Future Does Not Influence Recognition of Relevant Health Information[521]' Tiziana Jäggi, Sayaka Sato, and Pascal Mark Gygax explored whether the grammaticalisation of the future tense shapes how people remember health information. Their study focused on the idea that the way a language treats future events—through its grammar—might influence how those events are mentally processed. Specifically, they tested if different degrees of future time reference (FTR) would impact memory recognition for health messages about natural remedies. The hypothesis was straightforward: a less marked future in grammar might make the message feel more immediate, and therefore, more memorable. But their results found no such effect. The idea comes from earlier theories, like Keith Chen's claim that people speaking languages with a marked future tense are less likely to engage in future-oriented behaviours like saving money or adopting healthy habits. That theory drew attention because it suggested that grammar might shape real-world decisions. Jäggi and colleagues wanted to test the idea in a controlled setting, using recognition memory as a window into how language might influence mental representations of the future. They recruited sixty native German speakers and exposed them to health messages written in either high-FTR or low-FTR grammatical forms. Some messages used present tense with time indicators (low-FTR), while others used future tense forms (high-FTR). Afterwards, participants were asked to recognise which remedies they had seen. If the theory held, those who read the messages in low-FTR form—suggesting more immediacy—would recall the remedies more accurately. But the data showed no significant difference. Recognition scores were similar regardless of the grammatical framing. Interestingly, age and the sequence of message presentation had more impact than grammatical form. Older participants performed slightly better on recognition tasks, and messages presented closer to the recognition phase were more easily recalled. This suggests that familiarity or relevance may play a bigger role than abstract grammatical structures in shaping memory for future-related content. The study challenges assumptions about the psychological influence of grammar. While the theoretical framework connecting FTR to cognitive behaviour is compelling, its effects may be too subtle to detect through simple recognition tasks. Grammar shapes thinking not at the level of memory, but through more complex mechanisms like decision-making or emotional framing. It is also possible that the experimental setup was too artificial. Health decisions in real life involve context, emotion, and personal stakes, which are not easily replicated in a lab. These findings align with other recent studies that have failed to replicate the effects predicted by the Language-Savings Hypothesis. Rather than dismissing the idea entirely, Jäggi et al. suggest that future research should explore alternative approaches, such as narrative immersion or long-term behavioural tracking. In short, how people talk about the future may not directly influence how they remember it—at least not in the way this study tested. The grammar of the future might not be a shortcut to better memory, but it remains a part of the puzzle in understanding how language shapes human thought.

[521] Jäggi, T., Sato, S. and Gygax, P. (2023) The Grammaticalization of the Future Does Not Influence Recognition of Relevant Health Information. Department of Psychology, University of Fribourg.

Lexicalisation and the drift of language

In her analysis of lexicalisation and grammaticalisation, Laurel J. Brinton[522] addresses how words gradually shift in meaning, form, and function across time. These changes often go unnoticed in everyday speech. When someone says, 'We are celebrating a fascinating holiday today', most hear only the message, not the mechanisms behind it. Yet within this sentence are several examples of how language changes. Words like 'holiday' and 'celebrate' once had quite different meanings or uses, but through use and repetition, they evolved. Some terms, like 'fascinating', began as active processes and have since become descriptive. These shifts reveal how language moves from concrete to abstract, from expressive to structural. Brinton's book investigates these movements under the larger question of how words enter and transform within a language's system. She distinguishes between lexicalisation—the process where expressions become single lexical units—and grammaticalisation—where independent words or phrases become grammatical markers. These two processes, while different, often intersect. Brinton notes that grammaticalisation has received more scholarly attention, but lexicalisation remains just as vital for understanding how languages adapt over time. This text aims to bring lexicalisation to the forefront by mapping its relationship to grammar, historical change, and cognitive structures. A major theme is that language change is not binary. There is no clear switch from lexical to grammatical or vice versa. Instead, Brinton proposes a continuum. Words and expressions move along this line slowly. Some begin as vivid, descriptive terms and over generations become functional scaffolds within a sentence. Others resist change or evolve unevenly, creating blends of meaning that challenge neat categorisation. The suffix '-ing', for instance, appears in both verbal (celebrating) and adjectival (fascinating) roles, showing how the same form can follow divergent paths. Brinton also engages with how linguists define grammar and the lexicon. Generative linguists treat grammar as an internal, rule-based system, separate from the lexicon, which is a list of stored items. Functional linguists, by contrast, see grammar and lexicon as deeply intertwined, shaped by communication, culture, and cognitive demands. Brinton leans toward a blended view, suggesting that both formal structure and communicative use influence language change. Her analysis shows how structural rules and social patterns work together to shape language. Language change, Brinton argues, is neither abrupt nor arbitrary. It follows patterns—sometimes shaped by analogy, sometimes by the reinterpretation of forms. Words do not disappear but shift roles. Communities often use older and newer forms side by side for generations. The evolution of a word from lexical item to grammatical marker does not erase its past, but layers new functions on top of the old. Brinton's work challenges the idea that language is static or that grammar is separate from meaning. Lexicalisation and grammaticalisation both reveal that speech is always in motion. They show how people not only use language but also reshape it through repetition, context, and time. Words become habits. Habits become rules. And out of this slow transformation, grammar emerges.

How words lose their autonomy

In her study 'Grammaticalisation and Semantic Reanalysis[523]', Regine Eckardt approaches an old question with renewed focus: where does grammar come from? If humans only needed to communicate about objects or actions, complex grammatical systems might seem unnecessary. Yet every natural language develops intricate grammatical frameworks. This suggests that grammar is not a technical add-on but something deeply rooted in the human

[522] Brinton, L. J. (2000) Lexicalization and Language Change. Cambridge University Press.
[523] Eckardt, R. (2006) Grammaticalization and Semantic Reanalysis. Mouton de Gruyter.

mind. Eckardt's work tries to uncover how content words—nouns, verbs, adjectives—gradually become abstract grammatical tools. Grammaticalisation is the process where independent words lose their autonomy and become auxiliaries, modals, or affixes. Latin provides clear examples. The verb habere, meaning 'to have', eventually became a future marker in French, as in j'aurai ('I will have'). This shift reflects a change not just in form but in function. The verb stopped pointing to possession and started pointing to time. Over centuries, these shifts create systems where once-independent terms now support the grammatical skeleton of the language. Christian Lehmann's theory helps explain how these transformations occur. He identifies three parameters that change during grammaticalisation: weight, cohesion, and variability. As a word becomes grammaticalised, it becomes lighter in meaning, more bound to other elements, and less flexible in use. It travels a one-way path from concrete expression to abstract structure. This idea of unidirectionality—that words go from lexical to grammatical but not the other way around—has shaped much of modern grammaticalisation theory. But Eckardt focuses on something more specific: semantic reanalysis. While many theories focus on sound or syntax, she argues that meaning is often the key driver. Changes in word meaning allow shifts in function. A good example is the English verb 'go', which now marks future tense in phrases like 'going to leave'. This was not simply a metaphorical stretch. Instead, speakers reanalysed the verb's meaning and role in the sentence, allowing it to serve a new grammatical purpose. What makes Eckardt's view compelling is her idea that grammaticalisation is not just one process—it is a conspiracy of changes. Phonological shifts, syntactic patterns, and semantic reinterpretations work together, often invisibly, to reshape how language operates. A word might change its position in a sentence, lose part of its sound, and gain a new, more abstract meaning—all in the same historical breath. These changes seem gradual, but Eckardt warns that this is only how they appear. In practice, they often happen in discrete steps. A word retains its old use for a long time, then suddenly picks up a new grammatical function. From the outside, it looks like a slow fade. Inside the system, it is a snap. Grammaticalisation also gives rise to new expressions that do not quite fit anywhere. These might become discourse markers or peripheral grammatical elements, like 'well' or 'you know'. Such forms often come from familiar words that shift meaning through context until they perform a new role. Again, semantic reanalysis plays a central part. Eckardt's conclusion is that grammaticalisation is not about erosion or loss. It is about how meaning changes structure. The transformation of words into grammar is not a breakdown, but a reconfiguration. Grammar, in this view, is not a static system but a living result of change across many levels of language.

Semantic bleaching

Grammaticalisation is a process where words once used for concrete meaning evolve into elements of grammar. This shift often strips words of their specific content, leaving behind a more abstract function. In her work 'Grammaticalisation and Semantic Bleaching[524]', Eve E. Sweetser explores how grammaticalisation leads to what linguists call semantic bleaching—the weakening or fading of a word's original meaning as it takes on a grammatical role. This process can be seen in many familiar words. Take 'awfully' and 'terribly', for example. These words once conveyed feelings of awe or terror. Today, they are mostly used for emphasis, as in 'awfully good' or 'terribly nice', with little connection to their emotional roots. Their original force has faded. They now serve as intensifiers, highlighting other words rather than standing

[524] Sweetser, E.E. (1988). Grammaticalization and Semantic Bleaching. Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, 14, p.389. doi:https://doi.org/10.3765/bls.v14i0.1774.

on their own. Sweetser explains that grammaticalisation does not always mean total loss of meaning. Instead, it often involves a shift. A word's meaning becomes more general or abstract. The verb 'got' is a useful example. It used to mean 'to obtain' or 'to possess'. In phrases like 'have got', it now functions as a marker of possession, but the idea of obtaining something has mostly disappeared. It has become part of a fixed expression. This is a classic case of semantic bleaching—'got' remains in the sentence, but its original meaning has been pushed aside. This shift happens gradually but firmly. Words that start out as rich in meaning are used again in specific contexts. Over time, people stop thinking about the original meaning and begin using the word as a grammatical tool. Sweetser stresses that these changes are not random. They follow certain patterns. Frequently used words, especially in spoken language, are more likely to undergo bleaching because of repetition and familiarity. Another good example is the word 'love'. In the past, 'love' referred to a powerful emotion directed toward people. Today, people often say they 'love' pizza or a TV show. This broad use dilutes the intensity of the word. As Dan Jurafsky has noted, 'love' has shifted from an emotional state to a general marker of approval or enjoyment. This is a form of semantic bleaching, where the original emotional depth is replaced by something lighter and more flexible. Sweetser points out that what is often called 'semantic loss' might be better understood as a redistribution of meaning. The original content is not necessarily destroyed; it is just moved or transformed. Words take on new roles as part of the language system. Their old meanings may still exist in some contexts, but the main use has shifted toward grammar or abstraction. This view helps explain why language remains fluid and adaptable. It is not that people are misusing words or corrupting language. Instead, the structure of language itself encourages these shifts. As speakers use language to express more subtle or complex ideas, they push the boundaries of meaning. Old words take on new life in new grammatical roles. The shift is not always welcomed. Some see the bleached use of words like 'literally' or 'awesome' as signs of linguistic decay. But Sweetser's view, along with that of other linguists, suggests a more neutral perspective. These changes are a natural part of how language works. Bleaching may weaken a word's original meaning, but it also opens new ways of expression. Language loses some precision but gains flexibility. In short, grammaticalisation shows how words evolve from meaning to structure. Semantic bleaching is part of that evolution. Words like 'awfully', 'love', and 'got' no longer carry their original meanings, but they play important roles in modern speech. This transformation reveals the adaptability of human language, allowing words to shift and expand beyond their original contexts. Yet in the process, the personal experiences that once gave them life are erased, leaving only bleached shells repurposed as empty slogans in the industry of language.

3.2. Lexical nonsense

(When structure speaks: How nonsense becomes a pattern)

'He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot but do not let that fool you. He really is an idiot'.

Groucho Marx

'If the texts seem incomprehensible, it is for the excellent reason that they mean precisely nothing'.

—Alan Sokal, Fashionable Nonsense

Lexical nonsense and morphological sense

The idea that form and meaning in language are inseparable has long shaped linguistic thinking. Martin Maiden's 'Lexical Nonsense and Morphological Sense [525]' questions this assumption. Maiden argues that morphology—specifically lexical formatives—can operate independently of semantic content. His work focuses on the ways that abstract word structures influence language change, even when stripped of clear lexical or grammatical meaning. One of the key insights from Maiden's research is that morphology can remain active in language even when its connection to meaning is lost or obscured. This challenges the belief that all morphological changes are driven by semantic needs. Instead, Maiden shows how certain structures—what linguist Mark Aronoff calls 'morphomes'—function as formal patterns within language, not tied to meaning or phonetics. These morphomes help explain the persistence of irregular inflectional patterns in verbs like 'sing', 'sang', and 'sung', or 'go', 'went', and 'gone', which are not motivated by meaning but by entrenched morphological distribution. Maiden's examples from Romance languages demonstrate that these morphomic patterns often resist analogical change. For instance, Latin verbs related to 'dare' (to give) and 'donare' (to bestow) interact in ways that defy simple meaning-based explanations. Over time, their forms shift in response to distributional pressure from morphological patterns rather than semantic clarity. This suggests that speakers unconsciously respect certain abstract patterns, even when the original meanings are forgotten or merged. One of the most vivid illustrations of this morphological autonomy is folk etymology. Traditionally, folk etymology is seen as a process where speakers reshape unfamiliar words into forms that appear meaningful. However, Maiden proposes a more structural explanation. He argues that speakers often reanalyse unfamiliar words not because they seek meaning, but because they are driven by formal resemblance. This is how 'beaupré' in French, originally a nautical term, came to be understood as 'beau' (beautiful) and 'pré' (meadow), despite the mismatch in meaning. The appeal lies not in logic but in the illusion of internal structure. These restructurings reveal how speakers project known morphological elements onto unfamiliar forms. The result may be semantically absurd, like 'butterfly', which has no connection to butter or flies, yet it feels morphologically sound. This need for structural familiarity helps drive language change even when meaning lags or gets distorted in the process. Maiden also points to cases where homophony leads to unexpected reanalysis. Words that sound the same but have unrelated meanings—like 'berry' and 'donkey' in some dialects—can be treated as morphologically related. Over time, one form may replace another, not because of shared meaning, but because they are processed as structurally identical. This highlights how language users often prioritise form over content in ways that reshape the lexicon itself. What emerges from Maiden's work is a vision of language where morphology has a life of its own. Far from being merely a vessel for meaning, morphological form can guide language evolution on its own terms. It creates patterns, resists change and invites reinterpretation. Even nonsense—when structured morphologically—can gain traction and influence how languages develop. This has wide implications for how historical linguists understand change. It means that not all linguistic evolution is driven by communicative clarity or semantic need. Sometimes, it is the shape of words—their endings, their syllable patterns, their resemblance to familiar forms—that carries the weight. And in doing so, it reveals a layer of language that is structured, rule-governed, and autonomous.

[525] Maiden, M. (2012) 'Lexical Nonsense and Morphological Sense: On the Real Importance of "Folk Etymology" and Related Phenomena for Historical Linguists', in Eythórsson, T. (ed.) The Rosendal Papers. Oslo: Novus Press.

Fashionable nonsense

In 'Fashionable Nonsense[526]', Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont launch a sharp critique of how certain postmodern thinkers have misappropriated scientific concepts. The book grew out of Sokal's infamous hoax, in which he submitted a deliberately nonsensical article—rich in scientific jargon but devoid of actual meaning—to a respected cultural studies journal. That the article was accepted and published was not, as the authors argue, merely an editorial oversight but a symptom of a deeper intellectual malaise. The hoax served to highlight a widespread pattern among some theorists: dressing up incoherent ideas in the trappings of science to lend them authority. The book targets a group of well-known intellectuals—many of them French philosophers such as Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard—whose writings, according to Sokal and Bricmont, often use terms from mathematics and physics without understanding their meaning. The authors argue that such misuses are not isolated lapses but form a pattern of intellectual behaviour that devalues both science and critical reasoning. Their central concern is not to police disciplinary boundaries but to call out what they see as intellectual dishonesty. The issue is not the use of metaphor or cross-disciplinary thinking per se, but the absence of substance behind the scientific language. For Sokal and Bricmont, the damage lies in the erosion of standards. When obscure language is mistaken for profundity, the ability to distinguish genuine insight from empty rhetoric diminishes. Scientific terms like 'non-linearity', 'topology', or 'quantum gravity' are often dropped into texts without explanation or justification. In some cases, these concepts are misrepresented so badly that their original scientific meaning is lost entirely. The authors stress that this is not poetic license or creative analogy—it is a deliberate attempt to impress or obscure. The book responds to several common objections. One is that the quoted passages are cherry-picked or peripheral to the author's main work. But Sokal and Bricmont counter that even marginal claims reflect broader attitudes toward truth and knowledge. If a thinker is careless with scientific references, what does that imply about the rest of their reasoning? Another defence is that the authors are taking metaphors too literally. Yet metaphors, they argue, should clarify thought, not mask confusion. When metaphors rely on complex scientific theories that are poorly understood, they do more harm than good. Sokal and Bricmont also reject the claim that they are waging an ideological or political attack. They clarify that their critique is neither anti-French nor anti-leftist. Their concern is not political alignment but intellectual integrity. Postmodernism, in their view, often confuses scepticism about scientific authority with a rejection of science itself. This scepticism, when taken too far, becomes a form of relativism that undermines the very idea of evidence and argument. The authors admit that postmodernism is not the greatest threat facing society. Religious extremism and authoritarian ideologies are far more dangerous. However, they argue that the spread of anti-rational thinking within academia has long-term cultural consequences. If knowledge becomes just another discourse and reason is seen as a tool of domination, then public trust in science and rational debate may erode. Their final chapters call for a real dialogue between the sciences and the humanities—one based on mutual respect, not mystification. They argue for the importance of understanding scientific ideas before applying them elsewhere. Science is not just another language; it has rules, constraints, and empirical grounding. Misusing it does not enrich humanistic inquiry but impoverishes it. The challenge is not to draw boundaries between disciplines but to ensure that interdisciplinary work is conducted with care, humility, and honesty. 'Fashionable Nonsense' is a passionate defence of rational inquiry. It urges readers to

[526] Sokal, A. and Bricmont, J. (1998) Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science. New York: Picador.

be wary of intellectual performance that substitutes obscurity for insight. While Sokal and Bricmont's tone can be unforgiving, their aim is not to silence critical voices but to uphold the standards that make meaningful dialogue possible. For them, science and reason are not merely cultural products but hard-won tools of understanding that deserve careful use and deep respect.

Non-Euclidean scientific language

In 'Fashionable Nonsense', Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont examine the intellectual drift that led to the rise of postmodern relativism and the misuse of scientific language in the humanities and social sciences. They trace this development not to a single source but to a combination of cultural and institutional habits that eroded the value of empirical thinking. Their argument is not just an attack on philosophy or theory but a defence of intellectual honesty and clarity. One contributing factor is the neglect of empirical grounding in theory. Science is often misunderstood as a rigid machine for turning facts into laws, but it depends on a subtle back-and-forth between observation and theory. However, when empirical verification is dismissed, any internally consistent narrative can appear 'scientific'. This opens the door for elegant-sounding theories that are never tested against reality, theories which use mathematical language or borrowed technical concepts to give a veneer of seriousness without any real content. Another major source of confusion comes from what the authors call 'scientism' in the social sciences. Here, science is mistakenly reduced to simplified models, leading to failed attempts to treat society with formulas borrowed from physics or biology. When these projects collapsed, many scholars rejected science itself, turning instead to radical anti-scientific positions. Postmodernism gained ground during this retreat, positioning itself as an alternative to failed scientific models while also abandoning the demand for evidence or consistency. This rejection coincided with the natural sciences' overwhelming cultural prestige. The successes of physics and biology in the twentieth century were so compelling that everyone wanted to borrow their language. But this admiration often led to misuse. Philosophers and theorists began dropping terms like 'quantum mechanics', 'non-Euclidean geometry', or 'chaos theory' into their texts without understanding them. Sokal and Bricmont argue that no physicist forced Jacques Lacan or Julia Kristeva to misuse such terms—they did so voluntarily, often for rhetorical effect rather than intellectual insight. Postmodernism also borrowed from anthropology's legitimate use of cultural relativism. Anthropologists avoid judging other cultures by their own standards, which is useful in fieldwork. But this methodological caution was distorted into a cognitive relativism that holds all truths as culturally equal. In this view, creation myths and archaeological evidence are simply different ways of explaining the world. Such flattening of knowledge erases the distinction between tested theories and untested beliefs. Many of the thinkers criticised by Sokal and Bricmont also emerged from traditions that prized philosophical speculation and literary style over empirical rigor. These traditions provided intellectual tools to critique dominant ideologies, but they often blurred the line between poetic license and theoretical precision. The result is a landscape where metaphor replaces method, and obscurity is mistaken for depth. In conclusion, the rise of postmodern relativism and its disdain for scientific clarity can be traced to a convergence of misread scientific ambition, political disappointment, and cultural confusion. The authors do not claim that science can explain everything. Rather, they argue for a critical and informed dialogue between disciplines, one that respects the boundaries of specialised knowledge while remaining open to genuine interdisciplinary insight. The alternative is intellectual posturing that obscures meaning and disconnects academia from its responsibility to clarity and truth. The humanities, seduced by the prestige of science, built their own 'non-Euclidean' language—dense, metaphorical, and self-referential. Postmodern theorists repurposed scientific terms like 'chaos' or 'quantum' into

rhetorical devices, creating a linguistic chaos theory where meaning folded in on itself. What emerged was not insight but illusion: a system where obscurity masquerades as complexity and where intellectual rigor dissolves into stylistic performance detached from empirical accountability.

Linguistic obfuscation in fraudulent science

In their study 'Linguistic Obfuscation in Fraudulent Science[527]', David M. Markowitz and Jeffrey T. Hancock examine how language can be used to conceal fraud in scientific writing. By analysing a large corpus of over two million words, they compared papers retracted for fraudulent data with those that were not retracted or were retracted for non-fraudulent reasons. The key discovery was that fraudulent scientific papers consistently used more complex and difficult language. They were less readable, more abstract, and filled with technical jargon. This style of writing, the authors argue, is not accidental—it is a strategy used by deceptive researchers to hide misconduct behind a wall of linguistic complexity. The study suggests that linguistic obfuscation acts as a form of camouflage. Fraudulent scientists increase the density of references and technical language in their writing to make it harder for reviewers or readers to detect inconsistencies or question the data. Compared to unretracted papers or those withdrawn for other reasons, the fraudulent papers contained more causal language, more abstract terms, and fewer emotional expressions. This suggests that the goal is to make the paper appear scientific and rigorous while hiding the lack of real evidence. The more unreadable the paper, the harder it is to challenge. This tactic echoes earlier research in psychology and corporate communication. Liars, studies have shown, often avoid personal pronouns and use more abstract or causal language. In corporate fraud, deceptive financial reports also tend to be dense, filled with passive constructions and obscure terminology. Markowitz and Hancock extend this logic to science, arguing that fraudulent authors use obfuscation to confuse readers and to discourage scrutiny. The language serves not to communicate clearly but to mislead through form. The researchers collected data from PubMed archives spanning forty years, from 1973 to 2013. They isolated 315 retracted papers, with 253 withdrawn for fraud and sixty-two for other reasons. For comparison, they matched each retracted paper with an unretracted article from the same journal and year. In cases where exact matches were unavailable, they selected similar papers from adjacent years. The result was a dataset that allowed for a close analysis of linguistic patterns across fraudulent and legitimate scientific writing. To measure linguistic obfuscation, the authors used established tools such as LIWC and Coh-Metrix, which assess features like word complexity, sentence structure, emotional tone, and conceptual density. The authors created an obfuscation index, combining the frequency of jargon, causal terms, and abstraction, while penalising texts with higher readability and positive emotion words. The findings were clear: fraudulent papers scored higher on the obfuscation index than both unretracted and non-fraudulent retracted papers. They were more abstract, less emotionally expressive, and harder to understand. One notable pattern was the number of references included. Fraudulent papers averaged more citations than the control group. This strategy may serve to overwhelm the reader or to create an appearance of credibility through quantity rather than clarity. Referencing numerous sources can also discourage fact-checking, as each source takes time to verify. In this way, the illusion of thoroughness hides the absence of genuine substance. The study also attempted to predict fraudulent writing using linguistic features alone. Through cross-validation techniques, the authors found they could detect fraud with an

[527] Markowitz, D.M. and Hancock, J.T. (2015) 'Linguistic Obfuscation in Fraudulent Science', Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 34(4), pp. 343–357.

accuracy of just over 57 percent. While this is better than chance, it is not yet reliable enough to be used as a detection tool. However, the potential for using computational methods to identify suspicious writing styles is a promising area for future research. More refined models may help editors, reviewers, and institutions screen for fraud more effectively. Importantly, the authors examined whether these linguistic patterns varied across disciplines or regions. They found no significant correlation between obfuscation and scientific domain or geographic location. This suggests that the use of complex, unreadable language is a common feature of fraudulent writing across fields and cultures. The phenomenon is not confined to one area of science but reflects a broader strategy used by those who falsify data. This study builds on earlier work by the same authors, including a case study of the Dutch psychologist Diederik Stapel, who was found guilty of extensive data fabrication. That earlier research hinted at linguistic markers of deception but lacked statistical significance due to its smaller size. In contrast, the current study provides robust evidence that fraudulent science tends to be more difficult to read—not by accident, but by design. The broader implication is that language itself can serve as both a tool and a weapon in the construction of truth. When used ethically, scientific language clarifies, informs, and invites scrutiny. When misused, it becomes a smokescreen. Obfuscation shifts the burden of understanding from the author to the reader, often discouraging critical analysis and enabling deception to go undetected. Markowitz and Hancock's findings are part of a growing recognition that fraud in science is not just about data—it is also about discourse. Scientific misconduct is not always hidden in the numbers; sometimes, it is embedded in the words that frame those numbers. Understanding how language reveals or conceals truth is essential to safeguarding the integrity of research.

Misunderstanding of science

In 'Merchants of Doubt[528]', Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway reveal how a small group of scientists systematically worked to undermine public understanding of urgent scientific issues. Their book tells the story of how figures like Fred Seitz, Fred Singer, and others used their reputations to challenge established science, not by producing credible counter-evidence, but by manufacturing doubt. The story begins with Ben Santer, a climate scientist targeted in the 1990s after contributing to an IPCC report that concluded human activity was warming the planet. Santer's work was solid, but his conclusions sparked immediate backlash from conservative think tanks and politically connected scientists. What happened to Santer was not unique. It followed a strategy developed during the tobacco wars, where industry-funded experts cast doubt on the link between smoking and cancer. These same individuals later appeared in debates over acid rain, the ozone hole, and climate change. The core tactic remained the same: confuse the public by questioning the science, suggesting uncertainty where little existed. Seitz and Singer, both physicists by training, had no expertise in environmental science, yet they positioned themselves as authorities and attacked consensus views. Their credibility was bolstered by affiliations with institutions like the George C. Marshall Institute, giving them a platform despite their lack of relevant research. The authors show how these scientists worked in tandem with corporate interests—particularly the fossil fuel and chemical industries—to delay regulation. One of the clearest examples is the fight over ozone depletion. In the 1970s, Sherwood Rowland and Mario Molina discovered that CFCs were eroding the ozone layer. Their research, supported by further studies from James Lovelock and Harold Johnston, was strong enough to prompt regulatory concern. But the chemical industry quickly responded by funding its own research and launching public relations campaigns to sow confusion.

[528] Oreskes, N. and Conway, E.M. (2010) Merchants of Doubt. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

Committees were formed, counter-experts were recruited, and doubts were strategically amplified. Despite these efforts, the scientific evidence mounted. Instruments were developed to detect chlorine compounds in the upper atmosphere, providing undeniable proof of human-caused ozone destruction. Regulatory agencies began responding. The public also acted, shifting to alternatives like roll-on deodorants. This culminated in the 1979 U.S. ban on CFC aerosols, showing that action could still be taken even in the face of strong corporate pushback. The book's core argument is that these campaigns were not merely intellectual disagreements but coordinated efforts to mislead. The scientists involved were not innocent contrarians; they were knowingly enabling industries to delay action on public health and environmental threats. The damage was real: lives were lost due to delayed tobacco regulations, ecosystems were harmed by acid rain, and climate change remains an unresolved crisis exacerbated by decades of strategic denial. 'Merchants of Doubt' is not just a history of deception—it is a warning. Scientific integrity can be undermined by a few loud voices when money and ideology are involved. Science has been systematically undermined when its findings threaten powerful interests. The issue is not whether science is right all the time—it is not—but how people misunderstand what science is. Many expect certainty, a final word. But science is not about absolute proof. It is about consensus drawn from repeated, careful observation, testing, and peer evaluation. This misunderstanding leaves space for those who wish to create doubt, especially when financial or political stakes are high. The metaphor Oreskes and Conway use—a banquet of industrial prosperity for which the bill has come due—is revealing. For over a century, society has enjoyed the benefits of fossil fuels, synthetic chemicals, and unregulated industry. But now, the consequences have become visible. Climate change, ozone depletion, and acid rain show that the cost of unchecked industrial activity is no longer theoretical. Yet many resist paying that bill. And in resisting, they question not only the data but the legitimacy of science itself. Much of this resistance has been driven by ideology, not by new discoveries. The ideological fears led to campaigns that tried to discredit the science by labelling it as politically motivated. People often misunderstand who counts as an expert. True scientific authority depends on specialisation and active engagement in research. Modern science is deeply collaborative. It relies on systems like peer review, institutional checks, and replication. It is through these systems—not individual voices—that consensus is reached. Consensus is not weakness; it is the strongest point science can offer. Science gives society the best available guidance for complex problems. In the end, Oreskes and Conway argue for a new understanding of science. Not as a search for perfect truth, but as a disciplined method for managing uncertainty. When the cost of delay is global—rising seas, disappearing ozone, degraded health—trusting that process becomes not only reasonable but necessary.

How words gain new roles

Semantic bleaching refers to the process by which words lose much of their original, specific meaning and take on more general or grammatical functions. It is a common and subtle part of how language evolves. Words that once carried strong, clear meanings gradually become abstract, vague, or purely functional. In the field of grammaticalisation, bleaching plays a central role. It is what allows content-heavy words to turn into auxiliary verbs, suffixes, or intensifiers that serve mostly structural or rhetorical purposes. Linguist James Matisoff described bleaching as the partial erasure of a word's features, making it better suited for use in grammar rather than meaning. John Haiman offered a similar account, noting that a bleached word expands its use across broader contexts, eventually drifting so far from its original meaning that it can function independently of it. Both scholars agree that semantic bleaching is often accompanied by phonetic reduction, though not always. Consider the suffix -ly in words

like 'happily' or 'quickly'. This form evolved from an old Proto-Germanic term that once meant 'body' or 'form'. Over time, that meaning disappeared. The suffix now has no trace of its origin and is treated purely as a grammatical device for forming adverbs. A similar story applies to -like in 'childlike' or 'ghostlike', which also originated from a word meaning 'body'. These examples show how a once meaningful term can become a structural element in modern speech, its semantic past all but erased. This process is especially common with intensifiers—words like 'very', 'really', 'literally', and 'ultimately'. 'Very' comes from the Latin verus, meaning 'true'. It once expressed truthfulness but is now used as a mere amplifier. In 'very tired' or 'very late', it adds force but no longer connects with truth in any literal sense. 'Really' has a similar history. It can still mean 'in reality', but more often it just adds emphasis or emotion. 'I really liked it' is more about tone than fact. 'Literally' is the most controversial example. Once used to mean 'in a literal manner', it is now often used for emphasis, even in figurative speech: 'I literally died laughing'. Here, its original meaning is not just ignored—it is contradicted. Yet this too is a form of semantic bleaching. The word becomes a rhetorical tool rather than a precise descriptor. Emotional words like 'love' have also undergone bleaching. Originally, 'love' implied deep affection or romantic feeling. But in everyday usage, people say they 'love' pizza or a TV show. The word has lost its exclusivity and depth, becoming a general expression of preference. Dan Jurafsky points out that this kind of semantic flattening is common with emotional or affective terms. Over time, they broaden and weaken in meaning, becoming more casual or structural in use. Even profanity undergoes bleaching. The word 'shit' once had a truly clear reference but is now used generically to mean 'things' or 'stuff'. In casual speech, someone might say 'Get your shit together' or 'I've got a lot of shit to do', without any literal reference to its original sense. The word has been bleached of its offensive force and now fills a grammatical slot for generality. However, it is not always accurate to say these words lose meaning entirely. Instead, many linguists argue that meaning is redistributed. A word sheds some of its original features and takes on new ones. It adapts. The meaning of 'literally', for example, still exists in certain contexts. What changes is how frequently and in what kinds of sentences it appears. Semantic bleaching does not erase meaning so much as shift it. This process can lead to the emergence of new forms and uses. A bleached word might begin to function as a suffix, auxiliary verb, or discourse marker. It may also become a placeholder, a way to pad speech or signal emotion. Though these roles may seem minor, they help language remain flexible and expressive. In the end, semantic bleaching reflects the dynamic nature of language. It shows how meaning is shaped by use, habit, and context. Words wear down, not from carelessness, but from constant, repeated use in diverse settings. And in doing so, they take on new grammatical lives, continuing to serve speakers in evolving ways.

Fuzzy Grammar

In 'Fuzzy Grammar: A Reader[529]', edited by Bas Aarts, the concept of fuzziness in grammatical categories challenges the traditional view that linguistic systems are strictly rule-bound and clear-cut. The book brings together philosophical, psychological, and linguistic perspectives to explore how language resists rigid categorisation. Rather than assuming words or grammatical forms fit neatly into defined categories like 'noun' or 'verb', the contributors examine how language often operates along a spectrum. Categories blend, overlap, and shift, depending on context, usage, and perception. The philosophical roots of fuzzy grammar begin with Aristotle's classical idea of categorisation, where things either belong to a category or they do not. This framework, reinforced by Frege's logic and the Law of the Excluded Middle, has

[529] Aarts, B. (ed.) (2004) Fuzzy Grammar: A Reader. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

long influenced how language has been modelled. However, critics have noted the limitations of this binary system. Bertrand Russell argued that vagueness stems not from things themselves but from the language used to describe them. Wittgenstein expanded this idea by introducing the concept of family resemblances—where category membership is based on shared traits that need not all be present in each instance. Not all games share a single defining feature, but they still fall under the concept of 'game'. In cognitive science, Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory provided an empirical basis for these insights. Rosch showed that people tend to classify items not by a strict checklist but by their resemblance to a typical example—a prototype. A robin is a more typical 'bird' than a penguin, even though both are birds. This idea helps explain why some grammatical categories feel 'fuzzier' than others. Some words straddle categories depending on how they are used, such as 'run' functioning as both a noun and a verb. Gradience is central to how people process and understand language, not just in semantics but also in grammar. The book explores how these ideas apply to traditional parts of speech. Early grammarians like Dionysius Thrax classified words according to their roles and meanings. But modern linguistics, especially influenced by John Anderson and Dwight Bolinger, recognises that grammatical categories like noun and verb have central and peripheral members. Some forms fit clearly, while others blur the lines. This blurriness is not a flaw, but a feature of how language evolves and adapts. Martin Joos, in contrast, argued for a strictly discrete approach. He saw language as a telegraphic system composed of fixed, combinable units—phonemes and morphemes—like Morse code. From this perspective, linguistics should strive for precision and avoid ambiguity. Joos likened linguistic analysis to map-making: the map may not be perfect, but its structure must be consistent. He believed the complexity of real-world meanings falls outside the domain of linguistics, which should focus on structural rules and combinations. However, this view limits how language is used and understood. Joos's discrete model struggles to account for the variability of human communication. Even seemingly rigid categories like singular and plural exhibit exceptions and contextual shifts. The idea that language can be described purely in binary terms ignores how people interpret meaning—especially in ambiguous or poetic contexts, where rules are stretched or ignored. Fuzzy grammar offers a more flexible alternative. It recognises that categorisation is a mental process shaped by cognitive constraints, cultural context, and communicative goals. Linguistic categories often exhibit degrees of membership, and speakers rely on context and experience to interpret meaning. This view aligns with Optimality Theory and other modern frameworks that treat grammar as a system of constraints rather than hard rules. 'Fuzzy Grammar' opens a necessary space in linguistic theory for uncertainty, gradience, and variability. Instead of forcing language into fixed categories, it acknowledges that grammar reflects the flexible and adaptive nature of thought itself. Joos's rigid model serves as a useful contrast, showing what is lost when language is treated as a purely logical system. By embracing the fuzzy edges of grammar, linguists can better capture the nonsense and obfuscation of human language.

3.3. The limits of words

(Structure without sense: When vocabulary fails human experience)

'Every word is a prejudice'.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

'Words do not express thoughts very well. They always become a little different immediately after they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish'.

– Hermann Hesse

The limits of language

R. M. W. Dixon opens his inquiry 'Are Some Languages Better Than Others?' with a warning. Throughout history, the comparison of languages has often sparked conflict. Linguistic pride and prejudice have played roles in colonialism, racism, and cultural domination. But Dixon's goal is not to rank languages in some hierarchy of worth; instead, he invites reflection on how well a language meets the communicative needs of its speakers. What does it mean to call a language 'better'? Is it clearer, more expressive, more logical, or easier to learn? These questions are less about superiority and more about function. The limits of language are not merely technical but cultural. While many linguists say all languages can express the same thoughts, Dixon challenges this. He explains that what must be said in a language—its obligatory grammatical structures—shapes thought in subtle ways. English requires speakers to choose between definite and indefinite articles. Other languages might demand tense, gender, evidentiality, or politeness forms. Jarawara, for instance, has three past tenses and marks whether the speaker personally witnessed an event. This differs significantly from English's simpler structure. Such requirements guide the speaker's attention and expectations. Beyond grammar, cultural differences in vocabulary illustrate how each language reflects the worldview of its users. Aboriginal Australian languages, for instance, often lack a word for 'chief' because traditional social structures did not include hierarchical leadership. Translating such a term from English implies a concept that simply did not exist. The same goes for words like 'symbol' or 'honesty'—terms that carry ideological or psychological baggage in Western thought but may not have direct equivalents in other cultures. The example of a 'moon plate' given as a symbolic gesture to an Aboriginal man, but received with confusion, underscores how language is embedded in cultural meaning. Despite the differences, all languages share a basic structure. Each has a lexicon—its vocabulary—and a grammar—the rules governing how those words are used. Grammar is often learnt unconsciously. Its complexity, however, is constrained by the limits of memory and processing. Irregularities, especially, burden the mind and reduce the room for other grammatical features. There is a practical balance between linguistic richness and cognitive load. Languages adapt over time to suit what people can handle mentally and socially. Vocabulary size is another measure of linguistic potential. Larger societies develop specialised terms for law, medicine, technology, and art. Yet even smaller communities maintain a dense web of words for flora, fauna, and social life. While English has over 275,000 dictionary entries, most people use far fewer. A core vocabulary of 1,500–2,000 words suffices for basic conversation, with the rest serving specialised or poetic functions. Dixon also reflects on bilingualism and linguistic versatility. The myth that the brain can only manage one language is unfounded. In fact, learning multiple languages often sharpens one's awareness of grammar and meaning. Some societies maintain diglossia, using different language varieties for different contexts. Others rotate between languages depending on domain or audience. But even as languages vary and people switch between them, the total complexity any speaker can manage remains limited. From these reflections, Dixon sketches a vision of the 'ideal' language. It would include necessary grammatical tools—three tenses, multiple genders, and six or more cases—but avoid

redundancy or excessive irregularity. It should use consistent sounds and predictable word structures. An ideal language would not rely too much on tone or word order and would keep homonyms to a minimum. It would distinguish clearly between actions and results, processes and objects, kinship, and status. Yet no language achieves this ideal fully. Most carry the scars of history and culture, shaped by time and accident as much as design. An ideal language remains a thought experiment, a mirror to better understand how real languages work—and sometimes fail. The point is not to promote one tongue over another but to understand how structure influences expression and how expression shapes thought. Dixon's work reframes the question of whether some languages are better. The real issue is how languages balance function, complexity, and clarity. Each reflects the needs and limits of its community. No language is perfect, but all are rich in their own way. The ideal language is not a goal to reach but a lens to examine what people value, how they organise knowledge, and how they navigate the world through speech. In this sense, the limits of a language are the limits of its people's shared experience and imagination. Language can be seen as reflection of human constraint.

Are some languages better than others?

Language has often been a source of pride, conflict, and misunderstanding. In 'Are Some Languages Better Than Others?[530]', R. M. W. Dixon takes on this sensitive topic with care and clarity. He warns that comparisons between languages have historically fuelled prejudice and colonial superiority. Yet Dixon insists that, if approached scientifically, one can assess certain strengths or efficiencies in languages without declaring any language inherently superior. The key is understanding what 'better' means in each context. Dixon begins by emphasising that all human languages are complex systems developed to meet specific social needs. No language is primitive in structure, even if it lacks a writing system or global recognition. Every language, from English to Dyirbal, from Hua to Jarawara, has its own ways of encoding reality, shaped by its speakers' environment, culture, and history. What makes a language 'better', then, depends on the specific social, emotional, or functional tasks it is expected to perform. Languages fulfil many roles. They mark identity, coordinate action, express emotion, and convey information. Dixon shows how languages adapt to these roles differently. For instance, some languages require speakers to include detailed spatial or evidential information, like whether an event was seen or heard about. Others are more flexible in how much information must be encoded. This does not make one better than another, but it shows the variability in what each language demands from its speakers. One of Dixon's strongest arguments is against the assumption that written languages are superior to spoken ones. Writing is a recent invention compared to the vast timespan of spoken language. Oral traditions often preserve history, law, and poetry with incredible fidelity. Societies without writing rely on memory and storytelling in ways that develop different kinds of intellectual rigour. Writing, for all its advantages, can distance people from memory and oral reasoning. Dixon also discusses how languages shape thought through grammar and vocabulary. The division between lexicon (vocabulary) and grammar (structural rules) varies across languages. Some languages demand distinctions that others do not. English, for example, requires pluralisation; Dyirbal does not. Jarawara marks tense with additional requirements, such as gender and the reliability of the information. These features create unique pressures and affordances in communication. Phonology—the system of sounds—is another area where languages differ. Some languages have more sounds and shorter words; others have fewer sounds and longer words. Tone languages use pitch to change meaning, making communication more efficient in some ways. Still, these differences are not about superiority,

[530] Dixon, R. M. W. (2016) Are Some Languages Better Than Others? Oxford: Oxford University Press.

but adaptation to social and environmental needs. Dixon highlights that languages also differ in how they manage ambiguity. Homonyms and synonyms complicate meaning but also enrich communication. English, for example, contains many homonyms like 'bank', which can refer to a riverbank or a financial institution. It also has many synonyms due to its mixed linguistic heritage. This can add nuance but also cause confusion. Languages like Yidiñ avoid repetition with synonyms tailored for discourse rhythm and variation, a feature that can enhance storytelling and social interaction. Dixon further explores how words are classified. While English has clear distinctions between nouns, verbs, and adjectives, other languages blur these lines. In Dyirbal, words often shift between categories based on use. This grammatical flexibility allows for creativity but can also pose challenges for learners and translators. Finally, Dixon discusses how vocabulary size reflects cultural and environmental needs. While English has over 275,000 entries in the Oxford English Dictionary, everyday communication relies on far fewer. Smaller languages, especially those spoken by isolated groups, may function effectively with only 5,000 to 10,000 words. These languages are not deficient; they are precisely tuned to the lives of their speakers. When needed, they can invent or borrow words to adapt. Dixon's central claim is that all languages are equally human, equally expressive, and equally capable of change. The idea of one language being better than another is only meaningful in narrow, practical terms—such as efficiency for a specific task or adaptability to a new domain. Even then, such judgments must be made with caution and respect for linguistic diversity. Language is not just a tool for communication. It is a mirror of the world, shaped by the beliefs, relationships, and needs of its speakers. Dixon's work reminds readers that understanding languages requires both scientific rigour and cultural sensitivity. The richness of language lies not in hierarchy, but in the remarkable variety of ways humans make sense of their lives through words.

What is a word?

In 'Word: A Cross-Linguistic Typology[531]', R. M. W. Dixon and Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald examine the simple but deeply complex question: what is a word? Though the concept feels familiar in languages like English, its definition becomes much less clear when considered across the wide diversity of human languages. The book challenges the assumption that 'word' is a universal linguistic unit, revealing that the features used to define it often vary significantly from one language to another. Historically, many linguists assumed that words were the basic building blocks of language. This view shaped the study of grammar and lexicon in many European languages. But Dixon and Aikhenvald show how such assumptions can mislead when applied cross-linguistically. Some languages, especially those that are polysynthetic or strongly agglutinative, organise meaning and grammatical structure in ways that blur the lines between word, phrase, and morpheme. One problem is that 'word' can mean different things depending on whether one is focused on phonology or grammar. Phonological words are identified by sound patterns, such as stress placement or phonological rules. Grammatical words, by contrast, are defined by syntactic and morphological rules—how elements relate to one another within a sentence. In some languages, these two definitions coincide neatly. In others, they do not. A grammatical word may be made up of multiple phonological words, or a single phonological word might contain more than one grammatical element. Take clitics, for example. These are short grammatical units that cannot stand alone but must attach to a host. Clitics behave like grammatical words in terms of meaning and syntax,

[531] Dixon, R. M. W. and Aikhenvald, A. Y. (2002) Word: A Cross-Linguistic Typology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

but they do not satisfy the conditions of phonological independence. In languages like Yidiñ or Tariana, clitics reveal how fluid the boundary can be between independent words and bound elements. They force linguists to ask whether the concept of the word is still useful if it cannot consistently be defined. The book surveys a wide range of languages—African, Australian, Native American, Caucasian, and even sign languages—to show how the notion of 'word' must adapt to typological variation. In some languages, particularly isolating ones like Vietnamese or Yoruba, words tend to be short and monomorphemic, aligning with Western ideas of what a word is. In others, such as many Indigenous languages of the Americas, a single 'word' might contain what would be an entire sentence in English. Here, the line between morphology and syntax becomes especially blurry. Earlier thinkers like Sapir and Bloomfield offered definitions of the word that were elegant but too narrow. Bloomfield called the word a 'minimum free form', meaning the smallest segment of speech that can stand alone. But this definition fails when applied to languages where bound forms carry essential grammatical meaning, or where words are tightly fused from multiple parts. Sapir's idea of a word as a 'satisfying bit of meaning' sounds intuitive but lacks any clear criteria. Dixon and Aikhenvald argue that a single, rigid definition of 'word' is unworkable. Instead, they propose a typological framework that considers multiple dimensions—phonological, grammatical, syntactic, and semantic. Under this model, each language must be analysed on its own terms, identifying how it distinguishes (or does not) between levels of linguistic structure. For example, Northern Sotho has grammatical words that are composed of smaller phonological parts, challenging the Western intuition that words are always phonologically unified. A central insight from the book is that many languages do not have a native term for 'word'. This does not mean they lack words; rather, it suggests that the linguistic units we take for granted may not be universally salient. This raises further questions: are words real units in the cognitive structure of all speakers, or are they artefacts of how certain languages have been described? The implications of this work go beyond theoretical interest. Understanding how different languages conceptualise and structure words informs how linguists do fieldwork, write grammars, and translate texts. It also shapes how languages are taught and preserved, especially when many of the world's languages face extinction. In the end, the idea of the word remains useful, but only when treated with care. Words are not uniform entities across human speech. They are shaped by the structures and habits of the languages in which they exist. What counts as a word in English may not apply in Warlpiri or Inuktitut. Recognising this diversity reminds linguists that understanding has limits, and when they cross the border of language itself, they enter a no man's land where certainty fades.

The problem of the word

The question of what counts as a word continues to puzzle linguists. In 'The Problem of the Word[532]' P. H. Matthews examines this problem by comparing how different languages treat the concept and how definitions shift depending on grammatical traditions and structural features. While some languages make it easy to identify words, others blur the lines between words, affixes, and clitics, making any universal theory difficult to apply. In Ancient Greek, the idea of a word was not very problematic. Linguists recognised forms like enclitics—short elements that lean on other words for pronunciation—as words. This clarity came from how the language structured grammar and syntax. Similarly, in Latin, words were treated as clearly defined grammatical units, typically consisting of a root and its inflectional endings. Parts of speech were well established, and words were the basic building blocks of sentences. However,

[532] Matthews, P. H. (1991) The Problem of the Word. In: Dixon, R. M. W. and Aikhenvald, A. Y. (eds) Word: A Cross-Linguistic Typology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the situation becomes more complex in modern languages like Georgian and Modern Greek. While Georgian, as described by linguist Alice Harris, offers clear word boundaries, Modern Greek complicates the picture. Clitics in Modern Greek—short forms like 'ton' meaning 'him'—behave in ways that make it hard to tell whether they are separate words or part of a larger word. They occupy a space between affixes and independent words. This ambiguity is typical of many languages, not just Greek, and challenges any strict classification. Matthews notes that older grammatical traditions—especially those rooted in Greek and Latin—strongly shaped the modern understanding of words. These traditions assumed that words could always be clearly defined and that their boundaries were stable. But as linguistics has expanded to include a wider range of languages, those assumptions have often proved inadequate. In languages with complex morphology or unusual syntax, the traditional categories do not always hold up. For example, in Siouan languages of North America, the distinction between clitics and affixes is very blurred. Elements that seem to behave like affixes in one context might appear more like independent words in another. This inconsistency suggests that the labels 'word', 'affix', and 'clitic' might not correspond to fixed realities in language but are instead useful approximations that vary depending on the case. The concept of a clitic itself is central to this debate. It refers to a unit that lacks full phonological independence but carries grammatical meaning. In some languages, clitics attach to words like suffixes, while in others they float between words or shift positions in the sentence. Their behaviour resists easy classification, and Matthews argues that this makes them an ideal lens through which to study the broader ambiguity of the word as a linguistic unit. The key issue is that linguistic units often overlap. A clitic might look like an affix but behave like a word. A word might be phonologically independent but grammatically dependent. This fluidity is especially apparent when comparing languages from different families or structural types. Analytic languages like Vietnamese or Yoruba show a clear preference for short, distinct forms that look like words. Polysynthetic languages, on the other hand, may bundle entire sentences into a single complex word. Matthews concludes that while 'word' remains a useful concept, it cannot be defined in a way that fits every language. Instead of searching for one definition, linguists should accept that different languages require different criteria. Some definitions will be based on phonology, others on grammar, and still others on how speakers themselves treat the elements of speech. Words are real but not universally defined. They must be understood within the framework of each language, not forced into a single mould.

Making new words

In 'Making New Words[533]', R. M. W. Dixon offers a thorough account of how the English language forms new words through morphological derivation. This process involves the attachment of prefixes and suffixes to existing roots, which can shift both the meaning and grammatical category of a word. Dixon identifies around two hundred productive derivational affixes in English—approximately ninety prefixes and 110 suffixes. These affixes work systematically, allowing speakers to generate new vocabulary without needing prior exposure to each specific term. Dixon begins by classifying English words into three major open classes—nouns, verbs, and adjectives—and one smaller class, adverbs. These categories are particularly responsive to derivational changes. For example, adding the suffix -ness to adjectives yields abstract nouns such as kindness. Attaching -ize to a noun can form a verb like dramatize, while -ive makes adjectives from verbs, as seen in responsive. The suffix -ly changes

[533] Dixon, R. M. W. (2014) Making New Words: Morphological Derivation in English. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

adjectives into adverbs, as in quickly. Prefixes operate differently; inter-, for instance, can be added across classes, generating words such as interact, international, and interpersonal. Beyond affixation, Dixon discusses compounding, which combines two or more roots. Compounds may come from identical or different word classes. Some are semantically transparent, like wheelchair, while others are idiomatic or metaphorical, like cold-shoulder. The meaning of a compound is not always deducible from its parts. This inconsistency makes compounds less predictable and less productive than affixes, which follow more regular patterns. Dixon also explores the nuances of affixes with similar functions but different origins. Negative prefixes like un- and in- are a case in point. Un- is usually paired with native English words, while in- tends to combine with words of Latin origin. Compare unlucky with invisible. These patterns reflect deep historical roots, with un- deriving from Old English and in- from Latin. Such distinctions persist despite centuries of linguistic evolution, showing how language remembers its past. The book traces the etymology of affixes to show how they shift in function and meaning over time. For instance, the suffix -ness has Old English origins but was later applied to French borrowings like rudeness. Similarly, -ish stems from Germanic sources and is used to create adjectives like foolish or greenish, suggesting resemblance or tendency. Some affixes change a word's phonological form as well, -ous transforms danger into dangerous, often altering stress or vowel quality in the process. Dixon also tackles the productivity of affixes. Some, like -er for agent nouns (runner, baker), are widely used, while others have declined in frequency. The suffix -acy, once used in democracy and autocracy, is now largely replaced by -ness. Productivity is influenced by semantic transparency, sound compatibility, and competition between affixes. Over time, affixes that are simpler or clearer tend to dominate. Form and fusion are also addressed. Some affixes attach cleanly without changing the root, such as -ness in darkness. Others blend with the base, leading to new phonetic forms, as seen in information or employment. These changes reflect natural phonological processes as well as the cognitive drive for efficiency and recognisability. The second part of the book shifts to the broader significance of word formation. Language is not just a system for transmitting facts; it also shapes social relations, emotions, and identity. The proverb 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me' is dismissed as misleading. Words can leave lasting scars. A cruel remark may echo in someone's mind long after physical wounds have healed. Words carry weight. A simple word like word can refer to speech, promise, or sacred text. It appears in phrases like keep your word, word of mouth, or the Word of God. Special words, such as passwords, still hold power today, unlocking everything from bank accounts to private lives. English, with its flexible grammar and minimal inflection, allows many lexemes to serve multiple roles. Words can easily shift from noun to verb without modification. A term like Google started as a proper noun and quickly became a verb. These 'double-duty' words increase expressive power but also bring ambiguity. Headlines like 'Royal witnesses cheat' illustrate how word class ambiguity can cloud meaning. As Old English lost its inflectional endings, reliance on word order increased. In place of case markers, Modern English leans on syntax and word position to convey meaning. This simplification comes with trade-offs. While easier to learn and more efficient in some ways, it risks reduced clarity and increased ambiguity. Dixon concludes that language must strike a balance. Too much rigidity stifles expression. Too much flexibility creates confusion. English continues to evolve, with its derivational affixes serving as engines of lexical creativity. These affixes make the language vibrant and adaptable, helping it respond to cultural, social, and technological change.

Planned inequality of standard language

Language seems like a neutral tool—something used to communicate, nothing more. But the moment certain ways of speaking are deemed 'correct' and others 'improper', that tool becomes a structure of power. The standardisation of language, while often framed as a practical or even progressive project, has always been tied to the maintenance of inequality. Standard language does not just facilitate understanding; it draws borders, ranking people by how closely they align with a privileged linguistic form. What has considered standard is rarely chosen for its clarity or beauty. Instead, it reflects the dialect of those already in power—administrators, academics, ruling classes. Over time, their way of speaking gets codified in grammar books, taught in schools, and held up as the proper way to talk. Other dialects, even when logical and expressive, are pushed to the margins. This is not about linguistic merit; it is about control. Imagine two children growing up speaking different dialects. One's home language mirrors what is in the textbooks. From the first day of school, one feels affirmed; the other is corrected. This simple divergence grows into something structural. Standard language becomes the ticket to opportunity—jobs, degrees, respect—while the other dialect becomes a barrier, wrongly labelled as lazy or uneducated. Even the idea of 'bad grammar' is loaded. Consider phrases like 'ain't' or 'he be working'. They follow consistent rules in the dialects they come from. But they are judged as wrong because they do not conform to the standard. These judgments are not really about grammar—they are about social class, race, and access. Linguistic prescriptivism, the belief that there is one correct way to speak or write, often hides behind claims of professionalism or clarity. But clarity is contextual. What is clear and natural in one community may seem stilted or unfamiliar in another. The imposition of a single standard flattens this diversity. It enforces sameness and penalises difference. There is a long history of states using standard language as a tool of unification—or, more accurately, domination. From France's Académie Française to the grammar reforms in post-independence Norway, language has been used to define citizenship, erase minority identities, and centralise control. These processes were not driven by linguistic necessity but by political ambition. Of course, having a standard form of language can be useful—for legal documents, education, or media. The problem arises when the standard is elevated to the only acceptable form, and all others are ridiculed or excluded. That turns language from a bridge into a wall. Linguistic equality does not mean abandoning standard language altogether. It means loosening its grip. It means teaching standard forms without shaming others. It means valuing what people bring from their homes and communities, not treating it as something to be corrected. Because when language becomes a way to sort people into worth and unworthiness, it stops being communication—and becomes coercion.

The rise and fall of languages

R. M. W. Dixon's 'The Rise and Fall of Languages[534]' puts forward a compelling theory of how languages change—not as a slow, steady drift, but in bursts of sudden transformation. Drawing on analogies from evolutionary biology, particularly the idea of punctuated equilibrium, Dixon suggests that languages evolve in long stretches of relative stability, interrupted by short, intense periods of dramatic change. These disruptions are often caused by social, environmental, or technological upheaval. His model moves away from the traditional family tree approach and proposes a more dynamic view of linguistic history that better accounts for the complexity and instability of real-world language use. For most of human history, Dixon argues, languages remained in states of equilibrium. In such conditions, a group

[534] Dixon, R. M. W. (1997) The Rise and Fall of Languages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

of neighbouring communities might each speak their own dialects or closely related languages, existing without any one becoming dominant. With no overarching prestige language, linguistic features diffused gradually across the region. People borrowed vocabulary and grammar from each other, resulting in a web of shared traits rather than clean divisions. The changes were modest—small shifts in pronunciation, word usage, or sentence structure. But then, something would break the balance. Natural disasters, the invention of agriculture, religious movements, technological change, or conquest could all trigger a rupture in this equilibrium. These moments of punctuation brought intense social reorganisation, and with it, language diversification. During such a phase, a single language might rapidly split into many new languages, or one dominant tongue could rise and displace others. Dixon suggests that this is how proto-languages—like Proto-Indo-European or Proto-Austronesian—formed: not through slow drift, but through the sudden reordering of previously diverse but balanced linguistic regions. Such historical punctuation events have often left behind little trace except in linguistic reconstructions. Dixon notes that modern attempts to draw neat family trees for languages can be misleading. The family tree model works only during brief windows of linguistic disruption. For most of human history, languages existed in dense networks of contact, blending features across boundaries. In these equilibrium phases, the diffusion of traits was more important than the divergence of branches. The recent past has witnessed one of the most dramatic punctuation events in linguistic history. European imperial expansion, the spread of world religions, and the rise of global capitalism all created enormous disruptions to local language ecologies. Writing systems and mass literacy, guns and ships, Christianity, and Islam—all became tools for linguistic domination. A small number of colonial languages rose to global prominence, while thousands of local languages fell into disuse or disappeared altogether. In many cases, the arrival of European linguists or missionaries marked not just the beginning of documentation but the end of equilibrium. Their presence changed the system they sought to describe. Dixon draws particular attention to Aboriginal Australia, where the linguistic situation remained remarkably stable for tens of thousands of years. This offers a rare example of long-term equilibrium—a complex region where multiple languages existed side by side without any single one becoming dominant. Only with European colonisation was this balance destroyed. In this sense, the Australian example allows Dixon to infer what ancient linguistic regions might have looked like before they were broken apart by migration, agriculture, or empire. The implications of this model are significant. If language development follows a pattern of equilibrium and punctuation, then modern linguists must be careful about how they interpret historical data. Many reconstructions based on the family tree model may oversimplify the past. The deeper patterns of diffusion and contact are often hidden beneath the surface, and the story they tell is more fluid and less hierarchical than traditional models suggest. At the same time, this theory highlights the urgent need to document endangered languages. With another punctuation still unfolding—driven by global media, digital technology, and economic migration—the linguistic equilibrium of our time is being violently disrupted. If linguists do not record the remnants of disappearing languages now, the traces may be lost forever. Language, like species, can flourish in stability and collapse in disruption. The rise and fall of languages, then, is not just a story of words but a history of humanity's changing ways of living together. Rising populations and increasing linguistic complexity can fuel obfuscation and semantic entropy, amplifying confusion and leading to greater miscommunication. This may also be a process of revitalising language through novelty, purchased at the price of meaning.

4. HYPERNORMALISATION

4.1. Distorted communication

(When words mislead: On the normality of miscommunication)

'Systematically distorted communication is communication which, although not consciously deceptive, systematically excludes certain experiences and views'.

— Jürgen Habermas, Communication, and the Evolution of Society

'Distorted communication masks ideological functions behind a veil of neutrality, making critique all the more urgent'.

— Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2

Normalisation of distortion

The concept of hypernormalisation, introduced by anthropologist Alexei Yurchak and expanded by filmmaker Adam Curtis, provides a powerful lens for understanding the collapse of truth and meaning in both authoritarian and democratic societies. In late Soviet life, people knew the system was broken, but lacking alternatives, they clung to its rituals and language. This widespread pretence hardened into reality, creating a condition where dysfunction became the accepted norm. Curtis extended this idea to the modern West, where governments, corporations, and media manufacture simplified versions of reality to maintain order, even as that order frays. Hypernormalisation names the moment when distortion no longer seems like distortion, but simply 'how things are'. This framework resonates deeply with Jürgen Habermas's theory of systematically distorted communication. Habermas argues that language itself can be corrupted in ways that make misunderstanding appear as understanding. Communication becomes hollow—filled with rehearsed phrases, ideological cues, and emotional defences—so that people think they are participating in meaningful dialogue when they are not. Over time, these patterns solidify into the very structure of public speech, excluding alternative perspectives not by censorship but through the internal logic of communication itself. In 'Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More', Alexei Yurchak described how Soviet citizens continued to repeat official slogans they no longer believed, not out of faith, but because there was no alternative language through which to live publicly. The performance of belief became more important than belief itself, creating a reality where everyone knew the system was hollow, yet still sustained it through ritualised speech. A similar dynamic unfolds today as people scroll past headlines about ecological collapse and mass suffering, only to be met with algorithmic trivia or celebrity gossip. This pattern is echoing the film 'Don't Look Up' (2021), where society chooses distraction over confrontation as a comet speeds toward Earth. The absurd political decision to 'not look up' captures the essence of hypernormalisation: a shared denial so deep that catastrophe is normalised and action abandoned. The emotional effects of this condition are profound. Digital anthropologist Rahaf Harfoush describes discovering hypernormalisation[535] as a moment of psychological relief. It confirmed her experience was not madness or paranoia, but a rational response to systemic

[535] Matei, A. (2025). Systems are crumbling – but daily life continues. The dissonance is real. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/wellness/ng-interactive/2025/may/22/hypernormalization-dysfunction-status-quo.

unreality. As climate psychotherapist Caroline Hickman explains, what terrifies people most is not the collapse itself, but the realisation that those in power may no longer care whether society survives. In her words 'The worst thing in the world is to feel that you're the only one who feels this way and that you are going quietly mad and everyone else is in denial'. The result is not just anxiety or depression, but a deep sense of betrayal and confusion. Naming this experience—hypernormalisation—helps transform disorientation into understanding and understanding into the potential for resistance. Habermas, drawing from Freud, likens distorted communication to dreams, where underlying truths are compressed, displaced, or disguised. Public discourse functions, similarly, masking emotional or political contradictions beneath a surface of neutrality. In a hypernormalised society, language fails to reflect reality not just because of manipulation, but because its entire architecture has been warped. As Victor Klemperer noted in 'The Language of the Third Reich', even everyday words can become saturated with ideological residue, quietly shaping thought without notice. In such a context, Adam Curtis's 'fake world' is not a conspiracy—it is a shared hallucination maintained through language, habit, and silence. Hypernormalisation, then, is not simply a historical condition of late-Soviet collapse. It is a contemporary and ongoing threat, especially in the digital age, where algorithmic filters and endless content streams reinforce a sense of normalcy even as systems unravel. Recognising this helps people reframe their unease as insight. The goal is not to escape the distorted world entirely, but to puncture its illusions and recover the possibility of truth, mutual understanding, and ethical speech. Without such clarity, distortion will continue to pose as normality—closing off the imagination needed for genuine social and political transformation.

Systematically distorted communication

Jürgen Habermas's concept[536] of systematically distorted communication focuses on situations where understanding breaks down not due to unfamiliar words or concepts but because of deeper structural issues in how language is used. In these cases, participants might believe they are having a clear, meaningful exchange, but a closer look shows that real understanding is missing. This false appearance of communication is what Habermas refers to as pseudocommunication. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Habermas points to the ways that distortion in communication can become embedded in language itself. Freud saw dreams as examples of hidden meaning structured through condensation, displacement, and illogical grammar. Habermas applies this idea to social interaction. Just as a dream compresses or disguises its true content, so can public speech distort emotional or psychological truths. The result is language that fails to match internal thought or external action. Habermas identifies three levels where this distortion is visible. First, on the linguistic level, speech may break rules or rely on illogical patterns. Second, on the behavioural level, one sees repetition and rigidity that suggest unprocessed emotional content. Third, at the systemic level, the usual harmony between speech, gesture, and intention breaks down. These signs point to an internal conflict that has been pushed beneath conscious awareness but still shapes communication in powerful ways. To understand such distortions, Habermas distinguishes between standard interpretation and what he calls 'scenic understanding'. Traditional hermeneutics aims to clarify unclear meaning through context or grammar. Scenic understanding, however, attempts to reconstruct the emotional scene that gave rise to the distortion in the first place. This approach traces the message back to a formative emotional

[536] Habermas, J. (1984) The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society, Beacon Press.

experience that was never properly integrated into conscious language. By doing this, the distorted symbols can be returned to the public sphere, restoring some level of shared meaning. Habermas assumes that normal communication relies on agreement—on shared words, shared rules, and the recognition of each other's speech as valid. This shared ground allows people to distinguish between private feelings and public statements. But when this structure collapses, communication turns pathological. Emotions that have not been fully processed—or even recognised—disrupt speech from the inside. The result is not just confusion but a systemic failure to understand or be understood. Defence mechanisms such as denial, projection, and repression are central to this process. These psychological patterns keep disturbing feelings from reaching public language directly, but they still influence speech in subtle and disruptive ways. What appears to be ordinary conversation might mask deep-seated conflicts or emotional blocks. In this sense, psychoanalysis becomes a special form of language analysis. It does not just aim to understand what a speaker is trying to say, but why they are saying it that way—what deeper conflict is shaping their words. By interpreting communication as a symptom of inner conflict, psychoanalysis helps uncover the layers of distortion that make certain types of interaction seem clear when they are not.

False consensus vs. honest reckoning

In his article 'Habermas, Systematically Distorted Communication and the Public Sphere[537]', Alan G. Gross examines how Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action reveals the mechanisms through which language can be manipulated to sustain power structures. Gross explores the concept of systematically distorted communication as a threat to genuine public discourse. The health of both individual consciousness and social institutions depends on language. When communication is distorted at its core, this affects the public's ability to engage meaningfully with political and historical realities. Systematically distorted communication, as Habermas defines it, occurs when language is used in such a way that the appearance of understanding replaces real understanding. This breakdown does not come from a lack of words or information, but from a manipulation of meaning itself. Habermas outlines three major forces that hold society together: power, money, and solidarity. Power and money dominate the systems of politics and economics. Solidarity, however, is shaped within the 'lifeworld'—the space of everyday shared experience where people aim for mutual understanding. Linking these two spheres is the political public sphere, where social tensions caused by inequality can be addressed through open dialogue. In theory, this space allows strangers, united only by nationality, to form a shared identity based on communication rather than force. But for countries like Germany, with a difficult and violent past, national identity is especially fragile. It must balance remembering atrocities like Auschwitz with a forward-looking commitment to democratic values. Friedrich Nietzsche emphasised this tension between remembering and forgetting. He argued that both are necessary for individual and collective health. Forgetting too little leads to paralysis. Forgetting too much erases responsibility. Habermas takes this idea further, showing that only communicative action—grounded in truth, not myth—can generate real solidarity. The article discusses an exhibit that travelled through Germany, confronting the myth of a morally pure Wehrmacht. This narrative of an honourable German army fighting with dignity on the Eastern Front conveniently separates them from Nazi atrocities. But as Alan G. Gross points out, this is a dangerous fiction. Myths like this substitute false consensus for honest reckoning. They replace communicative

[537] Gross, A.G. (2000) '2–Habermas, Systematically Distorted Communication and the Public Sphere', Argumentation, 14(4), pp. 393–408.

action with systematically distorted communication. Language played a major role in embedding these myths. Victor Klemperer, in 'The Language of the Third Reich', described how Nazi ideology was carried not just through slogans but through everyday words, idioms, and structures repeated millions of times. Over time, people began to speak the ideology without realising it. Words like 'blood', 'folk', and 'tradition' became saturated with distorted meanings. Even today, traces of this language persist in public discourse, quietly shaping how people think and speak. This linguistic residue poses a problem for democracy. If the public sphere is shaped by language that has been corrupted, then meaningful dialogue is impossible. The danger is that instead of achieving solidarity through open, reasoned discussion, people accept illusions as truth. In this way, distorted communication undermines the possibility of forming a national identity rooted in accountability and mutual respect. As Habermas notes, Germany's path to political maturity depended on confronting its past, not denying it. Though history may not teach us everything, it can show us what not to repeat—if we are honest enough to listen.

Language as an impediment to social change

In 'Systematically Distorted Communication: An Impediment to Social and Political Change[538]' Alan G. Gross expands on Jürgen Habermas's concept of systematically distorted communication by examining how language can function as both a vehicle for mutual understanding and a tool for self-deception. This form of communication becomes problematic when people believe they are participating in dialogue aimed at understanding, while they are reproducing systems of control and inequality. The distortion is not always intentional or visible. Often, the participants are unaware that their speech serves strategic purposes rather than a genuine exchange. Gross identifies three illustrative cases: Nazi language, sexist language, and the language of pharmaceutical marketing. In each, language ceases to be neutral. It becomes a structure for maintaining existing power arrangements. Nazi language is the clearest and most devastating example. Victor Klemperer documented how words were redefined and weaponised. Language that once carried ethical meaning was stripped of it or replaced with ideological alternatives. These redefinitions entered daily use until even critics of the regime unknowingly adopted its terms. Nazi discourse became embedded so deeply that even victims sometimes echoed its distorted vocabulary. In this case, language enabled people to accept, and even participate in, violent state policies. Sexist language shows how distortion works at the level of social norms. In many cultures, the masculine is positioned as the default. Language frames roles, expectations, and authority through grammar and naming practices. This pattern reflects and reproduces male dominance. Though not as overtly violent as Nazi rhetoric, sexist language still distorts communication by reinforcing unequal power relations and closing off alternative ways of thinking. It creates barriers to understanding by framing the world in terms of hierarchy rather than reciprocity. In the realm of medicine, Gross highlights how drug marketing skews physician decision-making. Advertisements aimed at patients encourage them to request specific treatments. Meanwhile, subtle influences on doctors—such as gifts, sponsored research, or reps' visits—change prescribing habits. These effects persist even when doctors deny being influenced. The distortion lies in the self-deception: professionals believe they are acting rationally and independently, when in fact their actions are being shaped by corporate messaging. Here, language functions not as a medium for shared reasoning but as a tool for quiet manipulation. Gross argues that critique is the first step toward change. Habermas suggests that critique can emerge even from within distorted systems using

[538] Gross, A.G. (1999) 'Systematically Distorted Communication: An Impediment to Social and Political Change', Argumentation, 13(1), pp. 7–22.

minimal rational standards—such as the avoidance of contradiction and the appeal to shared norms. However, critique alone is not enough. People must also act. Social change requires moving from analysis to political engagement. It demands a broader rhetorical effort that includes emotional and ethical appeals, not just logic. In each of these cases, distorted communication keeps people from recognising the structures that shape their world. Emancipation begins when this deception is exposed and ends only when institutions are transformed. Language, then, is not just a mirror of society—it is a battleground for its future.

Distorted public sphere

Victor Kempf's article 'The Public Sphere in the Mode of Systematically Distorted Communication[539]' addresses the common idea that the public sphere has fragmented beyond repair. He challenges this view by returning to Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere—not as a specific location or institution, but as the background condition that allows communicative action to take place across society. Rather than seeing fragmentation as the end of public discourse, Kempf interprets it as part of an internal struggle within the social fabric—a response to deeper tensions between systems of control and the lifeworld where genuine dialogue might still occur. The rise of digital echo chambers and filter bubbles is often blamed for weakening democracy and shattering consensus. While these developments are real, Kempf argues they should be seen as defensive reactions against a shared space of meaning that persists. According to Habermas, the public sphere is colonised when the economic, political, and technological systems begin to reshape everyday language and communication. These system logics do not just influence institutions; they seep into private life and interpersonal interactions, turning what should be conversations into transactions or commands. But Kempf takes this further by suggesting that the lifeworld itself—where people live, speak, and relate—has its own internal contradictions. It does not just suffer from external pressures; it can also reject discourse on its own terms. This rejection takes the form of systematically distorted communication. People withdraw from public dialogue not just because of propaganda or surveillance, but because the very possibility of honest, mutual understanding feels blocked. They retreat into more manageable spaces—like niche communities or ideological silos—that mimic public engagement but lack the openness and unpredictability of real conversation. Still, Kempf believes that even in these conditions, the seeds of renewal exist. The lifeworld contains a dialectic—a push and pull between resistance and re-engagement. In this view, fragmentation is not a sign that the public sphere has disappeared. Instead, it shows that society is caught in a moment of pause, a kind of standstill in a longer process where communication might still reassert itself. The public sphere does not vanish; it contracts, hides, and waits for the right conditions to grow again. What Kempf proposes is a more hopeful understanding of public discourse. Rather than viewing today's divisions as permanent, he frames them as part of an evolving conflict between forces that isolate and those that seek connection. If systematically distorted communication can be recognised and critically addressed, then spaces for real dialogue may re-emerge. This approach pushes back against fatalism. It reminds us that the decline of public language is not a one-way street. In recognising distortion, people may recover the capacity to speak and listen across difference—not despite fragmentation, but through it.

[539] Kempf, V. (2023) 'The Public Sphere in the Mode of Systematically Distorted Communication', Philosophy & Social Criticism, 49(6), pp. 701–718.

Ideological conditioning

In their article 'Habermas on Systematically Distorted Communication'[540]', Aylton Barbieri Durão and Adja Balbino de Amorim Barbieri Durão explore how Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of systematically distorted communication. Habermas argued that communication can break down not just through manipulation or misunderstanding but because of deep-seated distortions linked to personal and ideological repression. Unlike Wittgenstein, who claimed that private language is a contradiction in terms, Habermas acknowledges the existence of linguistic forms that function as if private—particularly in cases of neurosis and ideological distortion. The authors point out that psychoanalysis was key in Habermas's account of this phenomenon. When a child encounters trauma that cannot be processed, the original symbol tied to that experience is repressed. In its place, the child substitutes another symbol, unaware of the switch. Over time, this replacement becomes habitual, forming the basis of repetitive behaviour. This structure resembles a kind of private language. Even though the individual uses public words, they no longer mean the same thing. The communication looks ordinary, but something has broken beneath the surface. Gadamer's hermeneutics sees ordinary language as a universal medium of understanding. Habermas disputes this universality. He argues that there are limits to how far interpretation can go, especially when dealing with distorted communication. Someone suffering from neurosis is not just misunderstood; they are locked into a system of symbols that actively conceal meaning. Interpretation alone cannot fix this because the speaker does not recognise the problem. Instead, what is needed is a clinical setting—a dialogic space where repressed symbols can be brought back into awareness. Habermas brings together ideas from Piaget, Freud, and linguistic theory to support his argument. Piaget shows that humans develop categories like space and causality before acquiring language. These prelinguistic structures shape how we later speak and understand the world. For Habermas, this shows that language is not just a transparent tool. It is shaped by earlier layers of thought and emotion, some of which are hidden or damaged. When those layers are disturbed, language can become distorted—carrying meanings even the speaker cannot decode. The authors also introduce Habermas's concept of 'paleosymbols'—symbols tied to earlier, preverbal experiences. These can reappear in distorted communication, often through dreams or repetitive speech patterns. But they resist ordinary understanding because they lack the grammar and consistency of shared public language. They are fragments of a personal language that does not fully translate. This is why Habermas insists on the need for clinical discourse: only in a therapeutic dialogue can these symbols be re-integrated into a meaningful whole. Habermas shows that systematic distortion in communication is not just a social or political issue—it also has deep psychological roots. It is a breakdown in the public use of language, triggered by repressed trauma or ideological conditioning. Understanding and overcoming this requires more than better interpretation. It demands a different kind of conversation, one that creates space for self-reflection and healing.

Systematically distorted language

Systematically distorted communication, as developed in the theory of Jürgen Habermas, refers to the subtle yet pervasive ways in which language is warped by psychological, ideological, or institutional pressures. This distortion does not simply refer to lying or manipulation. Rather, it arises when speakers are themselves unaware that the words they use no longer serve mutual understanding, but function instead as instruments of self-deception or

[540] Durão, A.B. and Durão, A.B.A.B. (2012) 'Habermas on Systematically Distorted Communication', Revista de Filosofia Aurora, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.

power maintenance. When communication becomes distorted in this way, language itself is affected—not only how it is used, but how it structures thought, identity, and social relationships. The distortion operates from within language and gradually hollows out its capacity to express truth, sincerity, and solidarity. In his early work, Habermas analysed this phenomenon in relation to both psychoanalysis and ideology. Drawing on Freud, he described how neurosis functions through repression. In these cases, individuals unconsciously substitute a repressed symbol with a replacement that appears innocuous but carries a hidden, unresolved trauma. This substitution process gives rise to paleosymbols—linguistic residues of unprocessed experience that escape conscious interpretation. Although the patient speaks using ordinary language, certain terms carry altered, private meanings. The result is a kind of personal encryption embedded within public discourse. The words remain the same, but their semantic function is compromised. Communication breaks down, even as it appears to proceed normally. This idea extends beyond clinical neurosis to the domain of ideology. Ideologies also operate through symbolic substitution. They mask social contradictions with stable but misleading signifiers. Nazi language, for example, transformed Enlightenment ideals into tools of exclusion and violence, hollowing out familiar concepts such as 'justice' or 'people' and filling them with nationalist, racialised meanings. As Victor Klemperer observed, everyday language under fascism became infected by ideology to such an extent that even ordinary citizens internalised and reproduced its logic unconsciously. The distortion became systemic because it no longer relied on individual intention but was embedded in the linguistic environment itself. Speakers became prisoners of a language that had ceased to serve emancipatory discourse. Systematically distorted language functions precisely by appearing normal. This is its most dangerous feature. The grammar remains intact, the vocabulary familiar, but the content is redirected. Habermas called this the privatisation of semantic content under the mask of public form. Such language preserves the illusion of communication while eroding its core values: truth, openness, and mutual recognition. It blocks reflexivity and suppresses dissent, not necessarily by forbidding speech but by scripting it in advance. The speaker does not lie—they simply speak a language in which truth is inaccessible or irrelevant. In the public sphere, systematically distorted language thrives under the influence of bureaucracy, markets, and technocratic discourse. Victor Kempf argues that contemporary phenomena such as filter bubbles and echo chambers do not signify the end of the public sphere, but rather its colonisation by system logics. The lifeworld—the shared space of meaning-making—has been penetrated by modes of language that prioritise control, efficiency, and profit over understanding. In such an environment, discourse becomes strategic rather than communicative. Terms are redefined, stripped of nuance, and deployed to generate compliance rather than consensus. The fragmentation of public discourse, far from being a natural effect of pluralism, reflects deeper linguistic distortions where words are no longer bridges but walls. This process undermines the very conditions for rational public dialogue. According to Aylton and Adja Durão, systematically distorted communication cannot be corrected through better interpretation alone. Traditional hermeneutics assumes that speakers share a common language whose meaning can be recovered through context and good faith. But when language itself is the site of repression, interpretation fails. What is required is a clinical or critical discourse—one that can expose and analyse the mechanisms of distortion. Such a discourse, like psychoanalysis, involves not just intellectual inquiry but the creation of spaces where speakers can reflect on their own speech, recover lost meanings, and resist the symbolic systems that deform their words. The political implications of systematically distorted language are profound. In democratic societies, power is supposed to be legitimated through public reason and deliberation. But when language is distorted, reasoned debate gives way to spectacle, technocratic jargon, or ideological cliché. Citizens

become estranged not only from one another but from their own speech. Language, once a medium of freedom and self-expression, becomes a tool of domination. Habermas's response to this is not to abandon language, but to deepen our awareness of its fragility and its power. A theory of communicative action must always begin with the recognition that language can fail—and that its failure often reflects deeper social and psychological distortions. Systematically distorted language is not merely bad communication. It is a structural failure of meaning rooted in repression, power, and ideology. It affects not just what is said, but what can be said. It shapes the possibilities of thought, relation, and action. To confront it requires more than critique; it demands new forms of dialogue capable of restoring the communicative function of language. This restoration is both a personal and political task: to speak again in a language that is not strategic, but sincere; not self-deceived, but self-aware.

Deceptive communication

In their exploration of deception[541], Gerald R. Miller and James B. Stiff examine how misleading messages function in political, commercial, and interpersonal contexts. They argue that while society claims to value truth, in practice deception is often tolerated—even expected. This contradiction reveals how deeply rooted deception is in modern communication. From political resignation speeches framed as voluntary to subtle advertising tricks, deception often serves to soften reality, protect reputations, or advance interests. The authors emphasise that deceptive communication is not always malicious. Sometimes it is strategic, a way of managing impressions or avoiding conflict. But its normalisation raises ethical concerns and complicates efforts to preserve honest discourse. In politics, deception can be cloaked as diplomacy. Public officials who resign under pressure rarely admit fault. Instead, their departures are framed as decisions made in the public interest. These narratives are crafted to avoid loss of face and protect institutional legitimacy. The same logic applies internationally. Wartime deception is often justified, as necessary. However, when such lies are exposed—like the U-2 spy plane incident—they can erode public trust. Citizens may come to expect deception, leading to cynicism and weakening democratic accountability. In commerce, deception takes the form of exaggeration. Sales tactics often involve highlighting benefits and downplaying drawbacks. From inflated product claims to ambiguous guarantees, commercial messages are rarely fully transparent. Regulatory bodies like the Federal Trade Commission attempt to curb these practices, but enforcement remains uneven. Miller and Stiff suggest that many consumers are complicit in these exchanges. The appeal of getting more than one pays for often overrides scepticism, allowing deceptive practices to persist. Their research also delves into the behavioural signs of lying. They identify two primary theories. The arousal theory suggests that liars experience stress, which triggers physical signs like fidgeting or changes in voice pitch. The cognitive theory focuses on the mental strain of lying. Crafting a lie demands more effort than telling the truth. As a result, lies tend to be vague, brief, and filled with hesitations or speech errors. Still, these cues are not always dependable. Observers often rely on stereotypes—like the assumption that liars avoid eye contact—when in fact experienced deceivers may do the opposite. Miller and Stiff caution that deception detection is notoriously difficult. Many cues people use to assess honesty have little correlation with actual lying. Some deceivers are simply better at managing their expressions, especially when motivated. This creates a gap between what people expect deceit to look like and how it appears. Vocal cues, such as changes in speech rate or tone, may be more informative than facial expressions, but even these vary with context. In conclusion, deceptive communication is widespread, adaptive, and often

[541] Miller, G. R. and Stiff, J. B. (1993) Deceptive Communication. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

socially reinforced. It blends ethical ambiguity with strategic purpose. While society promotes honesty as a virtue, the real world operates on a more complex set of rules—where lies can preserve relationships, protect institutions, or fuel commerce.

Unresolved dialogues

In 'Dialogues with Self and Others: Communication, Miscommunication, and the Dialogical Unconscious[542]' Ian Burkitt explores how communication is not just between individuals, but also within the self. At the heart of his argument is the idea that internal dialogues—formed through past relationships and interactions—shape how people speak, respond, and interpret others. These silent conversations influence everyday communication and are often responsible for misunderstanding. Instead of seeing the mind as isolated, Burkitt insists that thought and emotion arise in relation to others, even when those others are no longer physically present. He builds on social constructionist thinkers such as John Shotter and Kenneth Gergen, who argue that meaning is formed through dialogue. But Burkitt goes further, pointing to a deeper level of interaction that takes place within the self. These internal micro-dialogues carry the voices of others—parents, friends, teachers, or social figures—who have shaped one's identity. Sometimes these voices are in harmony, but often they conflict. When people communicate, they bring not just their own voice, but a chorus of past influences, some conscious, some hidden. Drawing from the work of Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin, Burkitt argues that identity is not static. It shifts depending on who one is speaking to, what one wants to reveal, and what one feels must be concealed. Every interaction is shaped by a complex layering of self-images. People juggle who they are, who they want to be, and who they think others believe them to be. These multiple selves can create confusion, not only in relationships but within the self. A person might act with confidence while feeling insecure or appear calm while masking frustration. These performances are not necessarily dishonest, but they do complicate genuine dialogue. Power also plays a role. Some inside voices carry more weight because they reflect dominant norms or past traumas. Others remain muted. Social structures—like class, gender, or cultural expectations—can shape which parts of the self are allowed to speak and which are silenced. Miscommunication, then, is not just about misunderstanding someone's words, but about the inability or unwillingness to hear the quiet, often neglected parts of their internal world. Burkitt calls for a deeper kind of communication. Not just one that exchanges information, but one that is open to transformation. For dialogue to be real, people must be willing to let go of fixed roles and expectations. They must make space for uncertainty and allow themselves to be changed by what they hear. Only then can hidden voices emerge, both within and between people. In the end, Burkitt's work reveals how language, memory, emotion, and power converge in every act of communication. Understanding others requires understanding the self, and that self is not a single voice, but a shifting conversation of many. Miscommunication is not simply a failure of clarity—it often reflects the deeper, unresolved dialogues that shape what people say and what remains unsaid.

Necessary distortion

The idea of the necessary systematic distortion of communication through language is rooted in the understanding that language, while essential for communication, inherently alters or distorts the messages it conveys. This distortion occurs because language is an abstraction — a system of symbols used to represent and communicate ideas, concepts, and experiences

[542] Burkitt, I. (1993) Dialogues with Self and Others: Communication, Miscommunication, and the Dialogical Unconscious, Theory & Psychology, 3(4), pp. 431–448.

that are far more complex than any single word or phrase can fully encapsulate. At its core, language operates by simplifying reality. It categorises and classifies complex phenomena, often by reducing them to terms that can be universally understood within a particular linguistic or cultural context. However, this simplification can never truly capture the entirety of human experience or the nuance of a given situation. As a result, communication is always a compromise between the fullness of a person's inner experience and the constraints of language. One of the most fundamental sources of distortion arises from the fact that words are abstractions, and abstractions always involve omission. For example, the word 'tree' refers to a category of objects, but it does not capture the specific characteristics of any individual tree — its size, shape, colour, or texture. Instead, the word represents a generalised concept that can be applied to any number of different trees. This abstraction inherently distorts the richness of the original experience of the tree, reducing it to a mere label. The distortion becomes even more significant when different people use the same word but carry different mental images or associations with it. Moreover, language itself is shaped by social and cultural factors, further distorting the communication process. Words and phrases carry meanings that are context-dependent and influenced by societal norms, values, and historical developments. For instance, the term 'freedom' may hold different connotations in different political systems or cultures, and the word 'justice' might evoke different understandings based on one's personal experiences, upbringing, or exposure to various ideologies. These shifts in meaning create gaps in understanding, even among people who speak the same language. Another dimension of distortion occurs when individuals use language to express complex or abstract thoughts, which often cannot be fully captured by existing words. Concepts such as 'love', 'truth', or 'freedom' are all laden with layers of meaning, and when people attempt to articulate their thoughts on these subjects, they inevitably simplify or omit aspects of their own experience. This is especially apparent in the realm of emotions, where language struggles to convey the depth and complexity of feelings. What one person may mean by 'love' can be vastly different from another's interpretation of the same word, despite both using the same term. In the context of scientific and philosophical discourse, the systematic distortion of communication becomes even more apparent. Every scientific theory, for example, relies on certain assumptions and simplifications that can never fully capture the complexity of the phenomena being studied. As theories evolve and new data is discovered, earlier models are revised or discarded. This process demonstrates that language (and the conceptual frameworks it supports) is always in flux and cannot fully represent the underlying reality it seeks to describe. In this way, language itself becomes a tool of abstraction and distortion that shapes not only how we communicate but also how we think and understand the world. This necessary distortion does not necessarily diminish the value of language, but it highlights the importance of being mindful of its limitations. Recognising that language is always a simplification and that communication is inherently distorted can encourage greater awareness in both personal and social interactions. It also invites us to think more critically about the terms we use, the meanings they carry, and the potential gaps between what we intend to communicate and how our message is received. Acknowledging the inevitable gaps in communication can foster greater empathy and understanding, and inspire more careful, precise, and open dialogue. The systematic distortion of communication through language is, therefore, a foundational aspect of human interaction. It reveals both the power and limitations of language as a tool for understanding and sharing our experiences. While such distortions may never be eliminated, awareness of them inevitably tempts one to exploit them for advantage rather than expose them to the public.

4.2. Language of names

(Naming and erasure: How language dismantles personhood)

'What is called objectivity in administration is often the elimination of human judgment'.

— Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust

'To call someone a name is to place them in a category—and to place them in a category is to control them'.

— Judith Butler, Excitable Speech

'Every word has consequences. Every silence, too'.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature?

Who named humans?(It is not God)

Humans were not named by God, nor by any divine hand recorded in scripture, but by a Swedish botanist in the 18th century. Carl Linnaeus, born in 1707 in the rural region of Småland, Sweden, was the man who formally named the entire human species. A clergyman's son and a gifted student of nature, Linnaeus devoted his life to cataloguing and classifying the natural world. In his groundbreaking 1735 work 'Systema Naturae', he introduced a revolutionary naming system known as binomial nomenclature—a system still used worldwide to scientifically define every living organism, including ourselves. Under this system, each species is assigned a two-part Latin name consisting of a genus and a species designation. For modern humans, Linnaeus chose the name Homo sapiens, meaning 'wise man'. The term Homo was derived from the Latin word homō, referring to a human being, while sapiens was intended to distinguish humans by their capacity for knowledge and reason. The label carries an implicit hierarchy: not just man, but wise man—an assertion both flattering and presumptuous. Linnaeus's contribution was not a mere linguistic act but a scientific milestone that attempted to impose structure and universal order on the overwhelming diversity of life. With this system, a small circle of European scientists created a naming convention grounded in Latin grammar that remains the foundation of modern taxonomy. Every species—from microbes to mammals—is now situated in this grid of genus and species, and humanity, too, is classified within the animal kingdom. The irony is striking. Despite religious traditions that place humans above the rest of creation, science classifies people squarely among animals. The perceived dichotomy between 'human' and 'animal' is cultural, not biological. In fact, all humans are animals, a fact that the Linnaean system makes inescapably clear. To be named Homo sapiens is not only to be named by another human but also to be grouped with primates, mammals, and all life forms that breathe, move, and reproduce. The origins of the word human stretch further back than Linnaeus. It entered English from Old French humain, derived from Latin hūmānus, the adjectival form of homō. Yet it was Linnaeus who gave the species its scientific identity, who placed humanity within a greater biological framework governed by classification and comparison. Even more curiously, the only specimen Linnaeus examined to define the species

Homo sapiens was himself. According to the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, his own body is considered the type specimen—the scientific reference point for all human beings. Although Linnaeus may have been a classifier, his impact was poetic. Figures like Rousseau and Goethe praised him not just as a scientist but as a thinker of rare depth. Swedish author August Strindberg even described him as a poet masquerading as a naturalist. His binomial system was not only practical but philosophical—it imposed language, symmetry, and Latin precision on a chaotic world. Through it, one man shaped how all other humans would be scientifically known. Linnaeus, not God, named humanity. And with that name, a new era began—one where knowledge replaced myth, and where the human species named itself in the mirror of reason.

Language of names

Names are among the first gifts people receive, and they carry immense symbolic weight. In 'The Language of Names[543]', Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays explore how names shape personal identity, evoke ancestral memory, and reflect cultural values. A name is never just a label; it becomes a vessel for stories, expectations, and histories. People feel their names deeply, often defending them like territory, or altering them when they no longer fit the life they wish to lead. Freud once suggested that names hold a fragment of the soul, a psychological charge that binds identity to language. For some, names are living memorials. Dan Jansen's victory lap with his daughter, named after his late sister, showed how names preserve emotional continuity through time. But this kind of naming can also place a heavy burden. Psychologists refer to 'replacement child syndrome' when a child is named after a deceased sibling and is subtly expected to fill that void. Salvador Dalí believed his eccentricity was a reaction to being named after a dead brother—a struggle to prove his unique existence. Names are not optional. No known culture has functioned without them. They organise social life, mark lineage, and establish status. A full name ties a person to a web of family and tradition. Yet names also carry magical and religious weight. In many traditions, to know a divine name is to possess power over the divine. Ancient Hebrew priests guarded the pronunciation of God's name with extreme caution. In Islam, the ninety-nine names of Allah carry deep spiritual significance. These practices remind us that names are not just about classification—they are about reverence, power, and access. Anthropologists like Frazer and Clodd noted that in many cultures, a name is believed to contain a person's essence. In such belief systems, harming someone's name can be as damaging as physical harm. This idea still lingers in modern life. A misspoken name can be insulting. A name forgotten can break a bond. A name deliberately twisted can be a subtle form of aggression. Salespeople and politicians often use names as tools for manipulation, knowing that a person's name is the shortest route to their attention. Names can change, and when they do, the person changes with them. New names are often linked to rebirth—religious conversion, artistic reinvention, gender transition, or the need to escape a past. George Eliot, Che Guevara, and Mother Teresa are remembered more by their adopted names than by those given at birth. In such transformations, the name becomes a signal of chosen identity. The freedom to rename oneself is especially pronounced in American culture. The legal system allows name changes with few restrictions, and the reasons for doing so range from trauma to personal reinvention. One applicant in New York simply wanted to break ties with her father. Another changed his name to 'George Washington America', turning identity into performance. Meanwhile, courts still resist purely symbolic or numeric names. One man's attempt to rename himself 1069 was denied on the grounds that it was 'offensive to human dignity'. The case raised

[543] Kaplan, J. and Bernays, A. (1997) The Language of Names. New York: Simon & Schuster.

old philosophical questions: is a name meaningful because of what it refers to, or because of what it represents? Famous cases highlight the emotional and bureaucratic complexity of name changes. When Renee Richards transitioned from male to female, she had to update everything—credit cards, medical records, memberships—each document a proof of rebirth. In contrast, some people try to vanish behind pseudonyms or disappear into anonymity. Figures like B. Traven and the Doe aliases reflect how names can be used as shields as much as signatures. Writers, too, use names to craft public identities. Samuel Clemens became Mark Twain to evoke the Mississippi River and signal literary rebirth. Nathaniel Hawthorne altered his family name to distance himself from ancestral shame. Zane Grey, Tennessee Williams, and Woody Allen all reshaped their names to better fit their artistic personas. These changes are not trivial—they signal deep shifts in how the individual wants to be perceived. Kaplan and Bernays show that names are not static. They evolve with the person and the culture. Names reflect who people were, who they are, and who they want to become. They are both personal and political, sacred, and practical. They hold together the threads of family, memory, belief, ambition, and transformation. Names are how people tell stories about themselves. Whether passed down through generations, chosen in moments of crisis, or shed like old skin, names carry meaning far beyond the letters on a page. They frame lives, carry burdens, offer hopes, and sometimes even grant a kind of immortality.

Naming as shaping of reality

In 'The Language of Names', Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays observed that the act of naming is a privilege reserved for the powerful, implying that language serves as a reflection of authority and control. This observation is not merely rhetorical; it reveals how naming can shape perception, enforce hierarchies, and construct social reality. Names are not just words; they are tools of influence. The act of naming—whether a person, place, or concept—introduces meaning into the world and imposes a particular framework for understanding. This theme runs deep in the history of ideas. In Plato's 'Cratylus', two opposing views clash over whether names arise naturally or through social agreement. Hermogenes argues for convention, believing that any name can serve if people agree on its use. Cratylus insists that names are connected to the essence of things. Socrates offers a compromise: names may begin in nature but shift under cultural and social pressure. This tension between arbitrary convention and natural essence still informs how humans relate to names today. It becomes even more powerful when considered in political and cultural terms, as Nietzsche suggested. The biblical story of Adam naming the animals highlights the deep link between naming and mastery. In giving names to the creatures of the earth, Adam is not just labelling them—he is also establishing a kind of dominion over them. In many religious traditions, to know the true name of something or someone is to hold power over it. The divine name in the Hebrew Bible, YHWH, was considered so sacred that it was spoken only by the high priests, reinforcing the idea that language carries a weight that transcends daily use. Modern philosophy and linguistics have complicated this picture. Ferdinand de Saussure argued that the relationship between words and their referents is arbitrary. Yet this arbitrariness does not mean names are meaningless. Rather, meaning emerges from the relationships among words in a linguistic system. Still, in everyday life, people often feel that names matter. Children may feel wronged if someone teases them by mispronouncing or changing their name. In politics and media, naming determines how people interpret events and behaviours. Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays emphasise this phenomenon in their study of names and identity. They show that a name is more than a label; it is often felt as an extension of the self. People define who they are through their names. Some change their names to signal new beginnings, escape past traumas, or align with new beliefs. Immigrants anglicise names to

fit in. Writers adopt pen names to shape their public personas. Revolutionary leaders choose names to inspire followers. In each case, naming functions as self-definition and social positioning. Naming also serves those in power. Governments use euphemisms to obscure violent or unpopular policies—'enhanced interrogation' for torture, 'collateral damage' for civilian death. Corporations rename products to attract consumers, even when the item remains unchanged. These strategies demonstrate that naming can disguise reality while presenting a more acceptable version of it. Slogans, campaigns, and propaganda rely on this principle. A successful phrase becomes a shared understanding, shutting down alternative interpretations. In this context, naming is not passive or neutral. It actively shapes perception. When public discourse repeats certain terms—'war on terror', 'illegal alien', 'freedom fighter'—it orients people toward specific values and reactions. To name is to claim authority over what something is and how it should be judged. As such, naming defines the field of responses. It limits or expands what people can think and say. This is why Nietzsche saw language as an instrument of the masters. To control naming is to define the boundaries of the imaginable. People cannot resist what they cannot name. Thus, language becomes the field where freedom is won or lost. Even the refusal to accept a name—rejecting imposed labels, renaming oneself—can be an act of rebellion. The field of onomastics, though sometimes dismissed as trivial, reveals the vast cultural and psychological influence of names. From product branding to sacred invocations, from birth certificates to pseudonyms, names anchor meaning in human life. Kaplan and Bernays trace this influence across personal, political, and historical landscapes. They show how names carry both memory and possibility. In doing so, they remind readers that the words people choose—and the names they answer to—are never neutral. Naming is a fundamental way of organising human experience. It defines identity, controls perception, and channels social power. As Nietzsche, Plato, and modern thinkers suggest, those who name the world shape how it is understood. The capacity to name is a form of control—sometimes benevolent, often strategic. It can liberate or oppress, clarify, or obscure. In the end, naming is not just about language. It is about who gets to define reality—and who does not.

Naming as defining

To name something is to define it—but also, to reduce it. Naming strips away the full texture of a thing’s presence and replaces it with a simplified sign. It transforms experience into label, event into category, uniqueness into a word that can be repeated. When someone uses a name, they are not describing the thing itself; they are performing an act of definition, often using borrowed terms and ready-made meanings. Most of the time, people do not even know the meaning of the name they are using. They just say the sound at the right moment, to the right person, and it works. That is enough. This performative function of naming gives it extraordinary power. You do not need to understand what 'terrorist', 'socialist', or even 'love' really means—you only need to say the word. The reaction follows. The effect is real. In this way, language becomes an engine for producing reality rather than reflecting it. A person who uses a term correctly within a shared context does not need to justify or define it. The community supplies the meaning. The term carries weight because the group believes it does. This is precisely what the Thomas theorem describes: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. People act not on what is objectively true, but on what they perceive and define as true. Naming a situation defines it. Once the word is spoken, the definition is active, and consequences follow. In a large society, few people have direct experience of what a term refers to. They trust the word, the label, the category. In small groups, people may know each other and the things around them directly. In mass societies, all knowledge is mediated, and most names are accepted on faith. The difference is crucial. In small groups, someone

calling you 'lazy' or 'heroic' might be based on years of lived experience. In larger systems—bureaucracies, religions, corporations, media—people carry names, titles, and roles that have nothing to do with who they are. These names are tools for management. They are efficient ways to organise, classify, and control. They make governance, commerce, and war possible. You do not need to know someone to tax them, imprison them, or promote them—you just need to know their name and what that name is supposed to mean. Over time, the names replace the people. The roles replace the persons. The map replaces the territory. To speak of 'the unemployed', 'the criminal class', or 'essential workers' is to speak of categories, not individuals. This erases the complexity of lived reality and turns people into symbols. Words do not only fail to capture the world—they rewrite it. This is why naming becomes a central process in building and maintaining systems of power. It allows those who control the terms to control the world that emerges from them. When institutions define something—whether it is a disease, a social group, a threat, or a truth—they are not just describing. They are setting the conditions for how others will respond. The performative use of language replaces the presence of direct experience. Repetition of the name sustains belief in its meaning. Naming also creates boundaries. To name something is to distinguish it from what it is not. To define is to exclude. Every label—race, gender, nationality, ideology—draws a circle. It creates inside and outside. Those who do not share the name become other. And so, language fractures the world, dividing what once was a shared human field into managed sectors of meaning. Families, tribes, nations, and classes are constructed out of words. This fragmentation is not accidental. It is essential to control. In large systems, direct experience is inefficient. Symbols are faster. Labels are stronger. Belief in the name becomes more important than knowledge of the thing. If a word like 'enemy' can be invoked with the right tone, the result is action. No need to investigate, no need to understand. Just say the name. Watch the consequences. In this way, naming becomes a mechanism of discommunication. It replaces dialogue with command. It replaces presence with representation. The power to name is not only the power to define—it is the power to erase, to control, and to reshape. The world built through language becomes real because people act as if it were. And this acting, this trust in words, sustains entire realities. Naming is not merely a label but an act of definition that shapes perceived reality. As the power to name becomes the power to limit, frame, and make consequences real through perception.

Language and the media

John F. Myles' analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's work brings language, media, and power into sharp focus. Drawing primarily on 'Language and Symbolic Power[544]', Myles develops Bourdieu's view that language is never neutral or purely communicative—it is always shaped by social forces and carries with it the potential for symbolic violence. Rather than focusing exclusively on Bourdieu's specific writings on television and journalism, Myles applies his broader sociological framework to explore how language operates across various forms of media, including talk radio, newspapers, photojournalism, and digital communication. These media do not merely transmit language; they actively shape and enforce social norms and hierarchies. Bourdieu rejected Saussure's structuralist concept of langue as an abstract system removed from real-life usage. Instead, he focused on parole, or language in use. For him, the way people speak—their accent, vocabulary, and grammar—reveals much about their social position. Language becomes a marker of class, gender, age, and education. In this view, language is not simply a tool to express ideas, but a form of social action, deeply tied to the

[544] Myles, J. F. (2010) 'Bourdieu, Language and the Media', in Language and Symbolic Power. Oxford: Routledge.

speaker's habitus—the ingrained habits and dispositions shaped by one's background and social experience. This has major implications for understanding media. Myles shows how media institutions help reproduce linguistic norms that align with dominant social groups. Standardised forms like Received Pronunciation in the UK or General American in the US are not neutral or inevitable—they are chosen, taught, and policed by those in power. Media outlets, from style manuals to newsroom editing practices, play a central role in maintaining these standards. Through such repetition, the dominant linguistic forms become naturalised and treated as correct, while other forms—regional accents, working-class speech, immigrant dialects—are seen as improper or inferior. What Bourdieu calls symbolic violence is this quiet imposition of hierarchy through language. It is rarely experienced as overt force, but it shapes people's lives just as profoundly. For instance, speakers of non-standard dialects may feel compelled to change their speech in professional settings to avoid judgment. Or, they may remain silent altogether, reinforcing their marginalisation. Media representations often reflect and perpetuate these dynamics, subtly favouring voices and accents that conform to dominant norms. The concept of the linguistic market is essential here. Each social setting has its own rules about what kind of speech is valued. In the media field, these rules are particularly strong, and media professionals act as gatekeepers who decide which voices are heard and how they are framed. For Bourdieu, this market is not just about communication but about power. Language has value because it is recognised as legitimate by those who control the means of symbolic production. Myles also addresses the issue of reception—how audiences interpret and respond to media language. While empirical data from audience research can help map the structure of the media field, Bourdieu's focus remains on the broader social relations that structure linguistic practices. Reflexivity—people's awareness of the social implications of their speech—can sometimes be seen in media interactions, such as code-switching or resistance to imposed norms. Yet for Bourdieu, such agency is shaped more by the body and habitus than by rational calculation. The media becomes a site where linguistic struggles are visible. Debates over standard accents, the rise of estuary English, or the calculated use of 'mockney' in British media show how language reflects shifting power relations. These are not trivial aesthetic concerns. They reveal how speakers try to position themselves socially through language. At the same time, the persistence of dominant norms shows how difficult it is to escape the gravitational pull of symbolic power. Myles argues that Bourdieu's framework remains vital for media studies today. Even as new technologies emerge and language practices change, the underlying structures of power that govern who gets to speak, how they are heard, and what forms of speech are valued have not disappeared. The media continues to be a central arena where these dynamics play out. From voice and accent to grammar and register, every linguistic choice is loaded with social meaning. In conclusion, the work of Bourdieu, as interpreted by Myles, shows that language in media is not simply about clarity or aesthetics. It is about who holds power, who is silenced, and how symbolic violence operates through benign forms like pronunciation and tone. Understanding this interplay is essential not just for linguists or media theorists, but for anyone interested in the subtle ways inequality is produced and maintained in everyday life. Language is the primary instrument of social inequality, enabling its reproduction on a mass scale in ways that would be impossible without it.

Naming as discommunication

The power to name has long been considered a defining feature of language and civilisation. It gives humans the ability to organise, describe, and manipulate their surroundings. Yet this same act of naming, often seen as a tool of understanding, also plays a central role in discommunication. Naming separates rather than unites. It fragments reality into categories,

draws invisible lines around people and things, and facilitates control through abstraction. What begins as a practical act becomes a political one: naming is a means of ownership, of classification, and of domination. From the moment Adam was said to name the animals in Genesis, the act has carried with it a sense of possession. To name something is to isolate it from the undivided whole, to give it boundaries and reduce it to a concept. As Emerson once noted, every word was originally a stroke of genius, capturing some essential experience of the world. But over time, those strokes become fossils. The richness of the world, once felt and seen, becomes a label. As Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays observe, names are never neutral—they carry histories, social positions, and expectations. When someone or something is named, it is not merely identified; it is framed, judged, and set into relation with a broader system of meanings. The child who learns their own name also learns their place. This process creates groups and boundaries. Names gather people into families, tribes, classes, and nations, while also dividing them. They become tools of identity and tools of exclusion. The same name that signals belonging also defines who is other. 'Us' and 'them' are born the moment a name is assigned. The power to name others—to call someone criminal, foreigner, or terrorist—is a form of power over their status, their rights, and their humanity. The more abstract the name, the easier it is to act upon its bearer without guilt. Naming thus enables discommunication: people stop seeing others as individuals and begin responding to the names they carry. Language, as N. J. Enfield points out, is especially good at shaping perception, often at the expense of truth. Lawyers, advertisers, and politicians thrive on this capacity, while scientists struggle against it. Words do not represent reality neutrally; they frame it. And just as a map is not the territory, the name on the map is not the place itself. Yet names become how vast territories are managed. With a label, a place becomes governable. With a word, a person becomes a category. Control becomes possible not by knowing things but by naming them. The abstraction inherent in naming scales well with social complexity. As societies grow, direct contact gives way to symbolic management. Leaders do not need to know the people they govern; they only need to know the names of their districts, demographics, and voting blocs. The intimacy of the local gives way to the legibility of the mapped. Naming becomes a form of distance. The more names, the less presence. In this way, naming destroys communion. Where once language may have served shared experience and mutual recognition, it now creates barriers. Words replace things. Labels replace persons. A community becomes a population; a person becomes a case file; a death becomes a statistic. The fluid experience of living is frozen into static signs. Language ceases to connect and begins to categorise. This is the logic of discommunication. It is not a failure to speak, but a success in controlling how others are spoken about. Those who master the system of names do not merely describe the world; they redesign it. They set the terms by which others are known, governed, or excluded. Naming thus becomes not only a tool of communication but a system of symbolic control. It abstracts, separates, and obscures. The path forward, if there is one, lies in remembering that a name is not the thing. To see clearly, one must look beyond the label, beyond the sign, beyond the name—back to the presence that language too often replaces. Words divide, replace, and control by shaping perception, redefining reality, and reinforcing the power of those who wield them.

4.3. Dehumanising language

(Vocabulary of cruelty: When words strip away humanity)

'Before they put you in a gas chamber, they called you a rat'.

— Victor Klemperer, The Language of the Third Reich

'Language can be used to justify anything—from genocide to bureaucracy—if it erases the face of the other'.

— Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity

Creatures of a kind inferior

Dehumanisation does not begin with violence. It begins with words. David Livingstone Smith's 'Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others[545]' reveals how language lays the groundwork for brutality. Before anyone is enslaved, bombed, or erased, they are first called something else—vermin, savage, beast. The transformation from human to subhuman happens linguistically. And without that shift in language, the acts that follow would be impossible. In small communities, where everyone knows each other personally, dehumanisation struggles to take root. Face-to-face relationships foster mutual recognition. It is difficult to turn your neighbour into an insect or object when you share daily life. But in large, impersonal societies, language becomes a powerful tool of division. Propaganda thrives where anonymity reigns. The more distant the other, the easier it is to rename them, to strip away their humanity with a single metaphor. Smith argues that dehumanisation is not simply a matter of hate. It is a rational process. People invent categories, draw boundaries, and exclude others based on perceived essence. The phrase 'creatures of a kind somewhat inferior', used in the 18th century to describe African slaves, expresses this logic perfectly. It is not crude rage, but cool classification that paves the way for cruelty. The act of naming implies knowledge and power. Once a person is named as less than human, they become available for domination. Language does not merely reflect thought. It shapes it. Naming someone as a rat or a cockroach allows violence to appear as extermination, not murder. It turns ethical prohibitions into acts of hygiene. Smith shows how this mechanism operated in Nazi Germany, colonial America, and beyond. In each case, the shift in language preceded the shift in action. The horror began not with blood, but with vocabulary. Propaganda serves to systematise this process. It repeats and amplifies dehumanising terms until they seem natural. When a word like 'subhuman' becomes part of the common tongue, it does more than insult. It removes moral constraint. It prepares people to act in ways they otherwise would not. The word becomes a weapon, dulling conscience and enabling atrocity. Smith's research suggests that dehumanisation is more than a by-product of ideology. It is built into the structure of group identity. Every group depends on an 'us' and a 'them', and language enforces that boundary. The more abstract and generalised the language, the easier it becomes to forget the individual behind the label. A name can erase a face. It is no accident that totalitarian regimes are obsessed with language. They understand that control over words means control over minds. In the end, Smith's message is clear. If people want to resist dehumanisation, they must begin with language. They must listen carefully to how others are named and described. Because once the wrong word is accepted, the rest may follow.

[545] Smith, D. L. (2012) Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Dehumanising always starts with language

In her book 'Braving the Wilderness[546]', Brené Brown reflects on how language sets the stage for dehumanisation. She argues that the words people use do not just describe reality—they reshape it. When language is used to divide, belittle, or stereotype, it becomes a tool of violence. The path to cruelty, she says, begins not with weapons, but with words. Brown's research shows that when people are stripped of their humanity in language, the social inhibitions that protect others from harm start to erode. Most people do not wake up intending to hurt others, but once a group is labelled as less than human, that harm becomes easier to justify. Dehumanisation works by creating distance. It allows one group to see another as undeserving of empathy. It begins subtly, often through casual remarks or exaggerated labels, and builds into cultural habits that excuse exclusion and abuse. The philosopher Michelle Maiese calls dehumanisation 'the psychological process of demonising the enemy', a tactic used to justify actions that would otherwise violate moral norms. This process is not simply about hurt feelings. It changes how people think, stripping others of moral worth. It reframes a disagreement into a battle between good and evil. Once a conflict is described in those terms, compromise disappears. The only options left are domination or defeat. David Livingstone Smith, author of 'Less Than Human', explains how this works on a biological level. Humans are wired to feel empathy for one another. Dehumanisation is a way to suppress those instincts. It builds a narrative that says certain people are not really people. Historically, this has taken the form of calling Jews rats, Tutsis cockroaches, Indigenous people savages, or immigrants animals. Such language has always preceded violence, making atrocities not only possible but accepted. Brown's data reveals that people feel emotionally unsafe not just when they hear opposing views, but when they hear language that reduces others to stereotypes. Emotional safety, she explains, is not about avoiding discomfort. It is about drawing a boundary at dehumanisation. Without that line, conversation breaks down. Without empathy, people can no longer truly listen. They talk past each other, trapped in a cycle of blame and moral superiority. Social media accelerates this process. Platforms reward outrage and allow users to attack others anonymously. There is little cost to dehumanising others online, but the cultural cost is high. Once someone is labelled a traitor, a criminal, or less than human, they are treated as disposable. Public discourse decays into insult and retaliation. Brown argues that accountability and dehumanisation are not the same. You can hold someone responsible without stripping them of dignity. True justice starts with seeing others as human, even when they have caused harm. Dehumanisation, by contrast, is never a path to healing. It diminishes not only its target, but the one who speaks it. Brown closes with a warning: When people desecrate others through words, they desecrate themselves. If people honestly believe in justice or faith, then that belief must extend to how they speak about their enemies. Recognising the humanity in others is the first step to preserving it in ourselves.

Ambivalence and transgression

Dehumanisation is never spontaneous. It begins with speech. The act of reducing another human being to something 'less than human' always starts by altering the way people talk. In 'Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others[547]', David Livingstone Smith shows that mass violence and cruelty rely not only on physical acts, but on language—

[546] Brown, B. (2017) Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone. New York: Random House.

[547] Smith, D.L. (2012) Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others. New York: St. Martin's Press.

on metaphors, slurs, and names that change how others are perceived. Once language marks someone as different, inferior, or dangerous, violence becomes easier to justify. The knife always follows the word. This process cannot thrive in small communities. When people live in close contact, when they know each other by name and story, dehumanisation is hard to sustain. One cannot easily call a neighbour vermin. There is too much context—too much shared memory, too many human ties. The more distant and abstract the relation, the easier it becomes to substitute names for persons. Modern propaganda needs mass society, where language can operate without personal encounter. In large societies, names take over where faces once sufficed. The enemy becomes 'Kraut', 'Jap', or 'gook'. The refugee becomes 'illegal'. The poor become 'welfare recipients'. These names simplify the world, stripping it of ambiguity and turning complex lives into manageable symbols. This is not mere insult. It is a tool of perception. When one no longer sees people but labels, empathy vanishes. Words, repeated often enough, break the link between language and the flesh it once named. Smith describes how soldiers rarely say they killed a man. They say they 'took him out', or 'got the target'. This kind of euphemism allows killing without the burden of guilt. Deception is built into the system. It shields not only the perpetrators from horror, but also the society that authorises them. The state, the media, and the military all take part in crafting this controlled vocabulary. The language of war becomes abstract, sanitised, and distant. Death, once personal, becomes procedural. But this suppression reveals something deeper: a moral conflict. Humans are capable of immense cruelty, but they are also wired for guilt. As Smith notes, most people must be trained to kill. Historically, many soldiers have refused to fire their weapons. The act of killing, even when justified by the state, produces shame. What emerges is a split—a psychological division. One part of the mind acts; another recoils. Ambivalence is not weakness. It is a sign that something human remains intact. This duality—of cruelty and conscience—is fundamental. The same people who conduct atrocities often describe a strange kind of joy in violence. Soldiers report feeling euphoria in the act of destruction, even love for their comrades in the heat of battle. But this is followed, later, by guilt, disgust, or trauma. The joy of violence does not erase the cost of it. It only delays it. The naming of others, then, is not neutral. It creates categories that permit action while silencing doubt. To call someone a 'beast' or a 'threat' is to prepare the ground for harm. Language does not just reflect reality; it transforms it. Once a name is in place, it becomes difficult to see past it. Reality narrows to the word. Power thrives on this narrowing. The more people one governs, the more essential abstraction becomes. Names allow rulers to manage vast populations as if they were uniform. The map, after all, is not the territory, but it governs the territory, nonetheless. And so does the name. One cannot control a million people individually, but one can control 'the workers', 'the heretics', 'the criminals'. Once the group is named, the policy follows. And once the name sticks, the individual becomes invisible. Language does not only link people. It also divides them. It draws boundaries—between us and them, friend and enemy, human and not. The greater the social scale, the more dependent society becomes on labels. And the more it depends on them, the more it risks losing the human in the name. In this way, every act of mass dehumanisation is preceded by a linguistic act. The weapon is primed by grammar.

Linguistic theory of dehumanisation

In 'Less Than Human', David Livingstone Smith shows how language can dehumanise others, turning them into symbolic targets and paving the way for violence and moral exclusion. Dehumanisation begins with language. Before a person is harmed, they are renamed. The act of violence is preceded by a verbal shift. A slur replaces a name. A metaphor strips away individuality. Words no longer describe a fellow human but suggest a creature to be feared,

hated, or exterminated. In Smith's account, this is not incidental—it is essential. Without the groundwork of language, dehumanisation cannot take hold. In small, close-knit groups, this process fails. People who see each other daily, who know one another's names, stories, and faces, find it difficult to see others as subhuman. Language in these settings stays connected to real people and relationships. It cannot easily drift into abstraction. But as societies grow larger, this changes. Distance sets in. People begin to rely on labels, stories, categories. In this environment, propaganda thrives. Mass media, education systems, and political rhetoric can spread dehumanising language across a population. The slur becomes common sense. The metaphor becomes reality. The shift in language leads to a shift in perception. Smith explains that this is not just about hatred. Dehumanisation solves a psychological problem. Most people do not want to kill. They feel disgust or guilt at the idea. But if the target is not seen as human, those barriers fall. Language helps to remove those barriers. Calling someone a cockroach or a virus makes violence feel necessary. The act is no longer murder—it is extermination or quarantine. Language is the tool that enables moral disengagement. It reframes cruelty as justice. This reframing depends on the belief in essences. Smith shows how people imagine that others carry invisible qualities that define them. When a group is dehumanised, it is said to lack the essential traits of humanity—reason, empathy, morality. The group may look human but is seen as an imitation. This makes it easier to justify harm. The victim is not just bad, but unnatural. Their removal seems not only acceptable but urgent. Such beliefs are reinforced by repetition. Language must be used again. Stories must be told repeatedly. Smith warns that this repetition is most effective when it becomes invisible. When everyone uses the same terms, they feel true. The language feels natural. People stop questioning it. A name becomes a filter. It controls how others are seen and treated. Bureaucracies adopt euphemisms—'processing', 'cleansing', 'relocation'. Soldiers speak of 'targets', not people. Journalists echo political terms. Slowly, the world is reordered. And yet, Smith points out something even more unsettling. This process does not require bad intentions. Those who dehumanise often think they are doing good. They believe they are defending themselves, protecting others, serving justice. Language helps maintain this illusion. It allows people to feel virtuous while committing atrocities. This is why dehumanisation is so dangerous. It hides behind the familiar. It wears the mask of reason, morality, even compassion. The terrifying possibility Smith raises is that language itself carries this danger. Once language becomes complex enough to name, divide, and abstract, it can be used to exclude and destroy. As language evolves, it becomes more effective at managing large populations. It becomes a system of control. Naming something can mean owning it, commanding it, eliminating it. Words replace reality. Names replace people. Categories replace communities. The very power that allows language to build society also allows it to tear it apart. In this sense, Smith's theory implies that language is not a neutral tool. It is more like nuclear energy—capable of great utility, but also immense destruction. Language enables distant coordination, abstract governance, and complex culture. But it also makes mass dehumanisation, exploitation, inequality, and war. As language expands, so does the potential for manipulation, distortion, and moral decay. Smith insists that countering this process requires more than arguments. Reason fails where empathy has been shut down. Philosophical appeals to dignity do not work when dignity has been linguistically denied. Even sentimental stories, as Rorty suggests, can be weaponised. Some of the most brutal regimes in history have justified their actions through long, emotional narratives of suffering and revenge. What matters is not just which stories are told, but how language is used, repeated, and institutionalised. The study of dehumanisation must begin with language. Not just what is said, but how words function in power structures, in institutions, and in the minds of individuals. Understanding this dynamic

is crucial. Otherwise, language will continue to be used not to connect people, but to divide and destroy them.

The language of the Third Reich

Victor Klemperer's 'The Language of the Third Reich[548]' is a rare and powerful chronicle of how a regime can seize language to control thought and behaviour. As a professor of literature and a Jew stripped of his academic post under Nazi rule, Klemperer turned to his diary to record a linguistic world collapsing under ideological pressure. From 1933 to the end of the war, he carefully noted the shifts in everyday German, documenting how ordinary words were repurposed, how new phrases emerged, and how propaganda colonised speech. His insight was clear: language was not merely a vehicle for Nazi ideology; it was its engine. Under the Third Reich, the German language was reshaped to reflect and spread the worldview of the regime. Every day phrases were infused with militarism, nationalism, and pseudo-scientific authority. Terms like 'fanatical' or 'heroic' became praise words, even when attached to acts of cruelty or mass death. Bureaucratic euphemisms such as 'special treatment' and 'final solution' cloaked the horror of extermination behind sterile language. Klemperer observed how these linguistic distortions did not just communicate policy—they shaped it. Once an act could be described in bloodless, official language, it could more easily be accepted. This was not a uniquely German phenomenon. Klemperer's observations resonate with George Orwell's concept of Newspeak in '1984', where language is deliberately reduced and distorted to limit thought and suppress dissent. The fewer the words, the fewer the concepts. If the language of rebellion is erased, so too is the possibility of rebellion. In both cases, words are not neutral—they are shaped to shape. The same logic appears in the Soviet Union and Maoist China, where state-controlled language was central to consolidating power. Slogans, party speak, and rigid definitions ensured that only one vision of the world could be spoken, and therefore only one could be imagined. Klemperer understood that these changes were not limited to official documents or speeches. They seeped into conversation, into schoolbooks, into signs, letters, and jokes. The true power of the Nazi language was its ordinariness. The more familiar the terms became, the more effective they were at altering perception. The terrifying aspect of this transformation was how unconscious it could be. People used the new words because everyone else did, unaware that their speech habits were guiding their thoughts. Klemperer insisted that totalitarian language is most dangerous when it becomes everyday language. This process exemplifies a broader social mechanism: when people accept a definition of the world—even one rooted in distortion—it changes what they do. The concept is central to what sociologists call reflexivity. A definition becomes real in its consequences. Language, in this view, is not simply descriptive but creative. It makes reality rather than mirrors it. The manipulation of language thus becomes a form of social engineering. What Klemperer witnessed was not just linguistic drift but social alchemy—where speech remakes the speaker, and public consensus is built on the ruins of free thought. In such systems, words are tools of transformation. They do not just describe people—they decide their fate. A man labeled an 'enemy of the state' becomes one, regardless of what he has done. A woman called 'degenerate' loses her rights, her job, her safety. These labels, repeated in official language and then in common speech, have the power to displace truth with a more convenient fiction. This is how operational success replaces objective truth. It does not matter whether the terms are accurate—only whether they work. If calling someone a threat justifies their removal, the label achieves its purpose. Klemperer's diary offers a slow-motion study of

[548] Klemperer, V. (2000). The Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist's Notebook. London: Continuum.

this process. He records how even his fellow Jews began to use the language of their persecutors, internalising the worldview that condemned them. Resistance, he argued, must begin with the smallest act: refusing to speak the words that distort. For Klemperer, reclaiming language was not just a moral duty but an act of survival. His notebook reminds us that totalitarianism begins in grammar, that dictatorship finds its roots in the sentence.

What the Nazi language can teach us?

In his 2017 article[549], José M. Ariso explores how Victor Klemperer's analysis of Nazi language can illuminate Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of certainty, revealing how totalitarian regimes manipulate linguistic norms to fix meaning and suppress doubt. Victor Klemperer's 'LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch eines Philologen' (1947) is both a diary and a philological study of how language was weaponised under the Nazi regime. The book's title refers to the 'Language of the Third Reich', and Klemperer uses the acronym LTI as a symbolic knot in his memory, a private code to survive a world collapsing into madness. Initially a joke, LTI soon became his shield—a means of observing and documenting how language itself turned into an instrument of terror. From the start of Nazi rule, German began to shift. Klemperer saw that speech was not just shaped by power but used to shape it. Words that once had clear, everyday meanings were now laced with menace or grandeur. Bureaucratic terms replaced direct language. Simple things were renamed with abstract or pseudo-scientific expressions that distanced people from reality. The regime flooded public life with a monotonous, orchestrated vocabulary that quickly became second nature—even for its victims. Language no longer described the world; it reconstructed it in the image of the Party. Klemperer studied how Nazis spoke, how ordinary workers spoke, and how the persecuted, including himself, slowly began to mirror that same poisoned speech. It was not just propaganda speeches that carried influence, but the subtle repetition of keywords and slogans in daily life. The real danger, Klemperer warns, lies in how these words infiltrated unconscious thought. People used them automatically, unaware of the values embedded in them. The word 'fanatical', for example, once negative, became a virtue. The constant repetition of this kind of vocabulary reshaped what was admirable and what was shameful. As he writes, words are like arsenic—taken in small doses, unnoticed, until it is too late. Language did not simply serve the regime—it was the regime. Klemperer saw that Nazi language—LTI—was more than a collection of phrases. It was a system designed to shape the world as people saw it. Instead of encouraging thought, it demanded obedience. Everyday language was filled with slogans, idioms, and phrases that were constantly repeated until they became second nature. Over time, people stopped questioning the ideas behind the words. In the sense proposed by Wittgenstein, the Nazi language created new certainties—things that no one thought to doubt because they were embedded in how people lived and spoke. Wittgenstein suggested that certainties are not chosen through logic. They grow with us, embedded in our early learning and social world. They become the foundations of our belief system—so basic that we cannot imagine a world without them. Nazi propaganda took advantage of this structure. It inserted new certainties through repetition and emotional intensity, bypassing conscious reasoning. The regime's language split the world in two: good and evil, Aryan and Jew, friend, and enemy. Complexity vanished. Doubt was painted as weakness or betrayal. By using strong emotional appeals, the Nazi state fused language with action. People came to act not because they reasoned, but because the words they heard every day told them who they were and what they must do. Language shaped

[549] Ariso, J. M. (2017). What the Language of the Third Reich – as described by Klemperer – can teach us about certainties in Wittgenstein's sense. Inquiries into Philosophical Pragmatics, 6(1), 37–55.

identity. Klemperer also noted that these certainties were not uniform across all individuals. Some believed deeply; others went along out of fear. Still, the language worked on both groups. Even victims began to internalise its values. This shows the strength of what Wittgenstein called the 'worldpicture'—a background of understanding so deep that questioning it feels impossible. The language did not need to win arguments; it needed only to be everywhere, repeated constantly. Ariso points out that changing these certainties is not easy. People rarely switch worldpictures through debate. They might resist at first, but change—when it comes—is slow and painful. It involves reshaping identity, breaking with familiar ways of speaking, and thinking. That is why Klemperer believed that certain words from the Nazi era should be buried permanently. They carry poison, not just in meaning but in the feelings they still evoke. What disturbed Klemperer most was that the language outlived the regime. Even after 1945, he heard echoes of Nazi diction in democratic speeches. Expressions that had once been filled with hatred and hierarchy continued to circulate, untouched by their past. Language shapes thought, and when it becomes the tool of ideology, it can lead people to accept the unacceptable. Through his diary, he shows that resisting begins with listening, analysing, and refusing to let words dictate one's soul. Klemperer's account of LTI shows how language does more than describe the world. It builds it. The Nazis understood this and used it to powerful effect. As José María Ariso explains, their manipulation of language transformed basic beliefs into tools of domination. These beliefs—what Wittgenstein called certainties—are not easily shaken. They are learnt through immersion and held without question. When language is used to fix such beliefs, it becomes one of the most dangerous weapons of all. Such language shapes a society united in its hatred of those deemed "less human," making speech itself a tool for measuring a person's or group's humanity and deciding how they should be treated. 'The propagandist's purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human', said Aldous Huxley.

5. DISCOMMUNICATION

5.1. Lingua Perversa

(The perverse language: Speaking against the soul)

'But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought'.

— George Orwell

'The degradation of language is the first step toward the degradation of man'.

— Octavio Paz

'The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out. The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked speaks perversity'.
Proverbs 10:31-32

Lingua Perversa

Not all words are acceptable in every situation; speech without discernment becomes a danger rather than a gift. The use of language demands self-discipline, for every utterance carries the weight of timing, context, and consequence. In the world of Homo loquens, a single

word can lead to exile or death more swiftly than a misstep in the jungle. In Proverbs 10:31–32, the Bible draws a sharp line between righteous and wicked speech: 'The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out. The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked speaks perversity'. These verses form part of the biblical tradition that treats language not as neutral, but as morally charged. Words reveal character. The righteous speak in harmony with divine wisdom, while the wicked use language to distort, provoke, or rebel. The 'perverse tongue' stands as a symbol of spiritual defiance—speech that resists correction, mocks righteousness, and corrupts others by its influence. The contrast presented is not simply between good and bad manners, but between speech that pleases God and speech that earns judgment. In biblical understanding, the righteous are not just morally upright; they are careful with words, aware of their weight and consequences. They speak what is 'acceptable'—that is, what fits the time, the person, the setting, and most importantly, what is pleasing to the Lord. In contrast, the wicked speak 'frowardness'—language marked by disobedience, pride, and rebellion. Scripture does not treat speech as a secondary issue but as central to spiritual life. Speech is how truth is declared, how relationships are formed, how justice is upheld—or undermined. A perverse tongue is not just misleading; it is spiritually dangerous. As Proverbs makes clear, it will be 'cut out'. Not merely condemned, but silenced, removed, judged. The righteous, however, 'know what is acceptable'. This knowledge is not innate; it must be taught and cultivated. It is learnt through humility, reverence, and alignment with divine instruction. The Bible consistently teaches that not all words are acceptable. What one says—and how, when, and why one says it—matters to God. Words are weighed not only by their truth but by their tone, timing, and effect. Christians are called to speak in a way that reflects the wisdom and character of God, not the restlessness and pride of the world. As Psalm 19:14 prays: 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer'. The righteous do not speak merely to be heard, or to win, or to wound. They speak to glorify God. In an age of constant expression, where speech is often reckless and unexamined, this teaching demands a return to reverence. Not all speech is fit for use, and not all language should be uttered, even if true. Self-censorship, in this biblical sense, is not repression—it is worship. To guard one's tongue is to honour the God who listens. Acceptable words are a fountain of peace; but the undisciplined tongue stirs judgment. He who guards his mouth honours the Lord; but he who speaks without measure walks toward ruin.

'The Pervert's Guide to Language'

Perversion, as Slavoj Žižek insists in an interview[550], is not about sexual deviation. Rather, it is a formal position, a structural mode of relating to language, law, and desire. Words like 'perversion' are themselves social constructions—contingent conventions that shift across history. What counts as perverse in one era may become the norm in another. Yet beneath these changing definitions lies a more fundamental act: the true perversion occurs not when one passively transgresses, but when one actively, even joyfully, chooses to violate the symbolic order in the name of freedom, power, or truth. This is the 'lingua perversa'. Real perversion, then, begins internally. It starts with an inner voice declaring: 'I will break the rule—because I dare'. This is not rebellion for pleasure's sake, nor sin out of ignorance. It is the cold, rational decision to trespass against the sacred, not to destroy the law but to test the subject's own

[550] The Žižek Times (2025). Slavoj Žižek: Perversion has nothing to do with sexual perversion. [online] YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ry8RlkmNaJc [Accessed 5 Aug. 2025].

sovereignty. It is, in Žižek's words, the moment when the subject experiences themselves as the instrument of another's enjoyment—but also as the author of their own transgression. This is why, paradoxically, modern subjectivity finds enjoyment in duty itself. Not in the law, but in the obscene supplement of the law—the pleasure that emerges from submitting to it or defying it with full awareness. Take the example of the father, in Žižek's oft-cited anecdote, who finally delivers his family to the picnic spot after a day of frustration, only to command: 'Now you better have fun'. Here, enjoyment has become an imperative. Failure to enjoy is now the true sin, and the subject feels guilt not for breaking moral rules, but for not fulfilling the social command to be happy. In late capitalist culture, pleasure is no longer optional—it is obligatory. But this obligatory enjoyment becomes itself a site of anxiety, failure, and pathology. One does not feel guilty for betraying the superego, but for failing to meet its increasingly paradoxical demands. This same logic applies to intimacy and the public-private divide. What was once secret is now exhibition. In today's digital culture, private acts—whether emotional, sexual, or excretory—are not simply exposed; they are aestheticised, shared, and commodified. Yet this does not produce liberation. It creates a new space of isolation, a solipsistic collectivisation, in which individuals are hyper-visible yet radically alone. Žižek's example of webcams in toilets, or celebrities whose intimate lives are indistinguishable from their public image, is not just grotesque—it is diagnostic. The subject is no longer hidden from the big Other, but is instead absorbed into a perverse field of total visibility that no longer distinguishes between authentic intimacy and socialised performance. Against this backdrop, Žižek offers an unlikely proposal: to reclaim subjectivity not through secrecy, but through public commitment. True privacy, he suggests, no longer lies in withdrawal from the gaze, but in the political courage to assert one's love or belief publicly. The ceremony of marriage, for instance, is not merely a legal act but a performative declaration—'I dare to say it aloud'. It is a minimal socialisation of intimacy, a reclaiming of meaning within a perverse symbolic order that otherwise turns even enjoyment into a trap. Thus, 'The Pervert's Guide to Language' is not a manual of forbidden desires, but a diagnosis of how power, duty, intimacy, and speech have become entangled in perverse structures. Real perversity is not in breaking the rules unconsciously, but in deliberately confronting, inverting, and owning them. Like Jacob Frank's antinomianism—where followers were required to transgress in order to fulfil a higher spiritual calling—our perversion today is to speak, act, and enjoy against the grain of what we are told to want. That is 'lingua perversa': the wilful corruption of language, not as error, but as experiment. In the 2012 documentary 'The Pervert's Guide to Ideology', philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that true ideology is not what we consciously believe, but the invisible structure that dictates what we must enjoy and how we must desire. In this sense, language itself becomes ideological when it masks command as freedom and obligation as pleasure—making lingua perversa the medium through which ideology reproduces itself.

Distortion in language

Language is meant to help people understand each other. But the act of communication is rarely clean or simple. Meaning often bends, shifts, or breaks between sender and receiver. This is not always because someone is lying or confused. Rather, it is the structure of communication itself that leads to distortion. A message, even when carefully crafted, often changes shape as it travels through different minds, environments, and social settings. One of the key contributors to distortion is noise. Noise, in communication theory, does not just mean sound. It refers to anything that interferes with a message. This could be loud music in a café, bad handwriting, or even an unstable internet connection. But noise is also internal. A person's hearing difficulty, wandering attention, emotional state, or preconceived beliefs can all interfere

with how a message is received. These forms of noise—physical, physiological, psychological, and semantic—can break the connection between words and meaning. Semantic noise is the most subtle but also the most powerful. It emerges when language fails to match understanding. Words can be ambiguous, phrases misinterpreted, or context missing. Two people can use the same sentence and mean completely different things. As a result, meaning slips—sometimes slightly, sometimes entirely. A helpful analogy comes from signal processing. In electronics, distortion happens when a signal is changed from its original form. Think of a video that glitches or a voice on a call that crackles and warps. The basic structure is there, but something is off. Engineers design systems to minimise this. Still, distortion persists. In fact, some systems even use distortion deliberately. Noise reduction tools, like those found in audio equipment, sometimes introduce their own changes to better counteract interference. In music, distortion is used creatively—especially with electric guitars—to produce specific sounds that would not occur naturally. This idea translates well to language. Communication is never pure. Like a distorted audio track, what reaches the listener is never exactly what the speaker intended. And in some ways, this is just how language works. Interpretation always involves reconstruction. The listener does not just receive a message—they rebuild it based on memory, emotion, context, and prior knowledge. That reconstruction process is where distortion happens. Social theorist Jürgen Habermas takes this further. He argues that distortion is not just technical or accidental. It is built into the very structure of language in society. For him, communication is shaped by power, ideology, and institutional norms. These factors influence not just what people say, but how they say it, who is allowed to speak, and how their speech is received. In this view, distortion is systematic. It is not a glitch in the system—it is the system. Every message carries the imprint of the structures that produced it. This reframes distortion not as an error to be corrected, but as a normal feature of communication. Language is filtered through individuals and institutions. Messages are shaped by political, cultural, and emotional forces. And meaning is always a negotiation, not a fixed transmission. The dream of perfectly transparent language—a message sent, a message received, unbroken—is just that: a dream.

Deception as a function of language

In the 2020 article 'Deception as a Derived Function of Language[551]', Nathan Oesch argues that deception is not merely a misuse of language but one of its evolved, adaptive functions. He explores how linguistic complexity enables nuanced forms of lying, suggesting that the capacity to deceive may have co-evolved with language to serve social and survival advantages in human groups. Language is often held up as the feature that most clearly separates humans from other species. While many animals communicate through sounds, gestures, or signals, only humans can build meaning using vast vocabularies and grammar. One theory suggests that the original purpose of language was deception, that it evolved to manipulate others. But according to Nathan Oesch, this view does not fully capture the social role of human language. In his research, Oesch argues that deception is a secondary function, emerging later in language's development, with social bonding being its primary purpose. The roots of the deception theory can be found in animal communication studies. In some species, deceptive behaviour can be observed. Monkeys, for instance, have been seen giving false alarm calls to scare others away from food. Theorists like Richard Dawkins and John Krebs have suggested that animal signals are part of a constant struggle between manipulation and resistance—a sort of evolutionary arms race. However, deception in animals tends to be limited to specific

[551] Oesch, N. (2020) 'Deception as a Derived Function of Language', Adaptive Human Behaviour and Physiology, 6(4), pp. 371–386.

situations. It is not the dominant feature of their communication systems. When applied to humans, this framework becomes more complex. Deception certainly exists, but it is not as widespread or central as the manipulation model would imply. People tell the truth during daily conversations. Studies in developmental psychology show that children begin lying for self-gain around age four to seven, but these early lies are often replaced or balanced by so-called 'white lies' meant to preserve relationships or protect others from hurt. These social lies reveal that deception, in many human contexts, is not simply selfish but often has a cooperative dimension. Rather than seeing deception as the original purpose of language, it makes more sense to view it as a side effect of a system designed for social coordination. Language allows people to build shared understandings, maintain group cohesion, and navigate the complexities of social life. In this view, deception is a derived function—a capacity that emerged only after language had already developed for more prosocial purposes. This theory fits well with broader perspectives on human evolution. As humans became more socially complex, language helped individuals coordinate, share knowledge, and build trust. Deception became useful in certain contexts, but it depended on the existence of trust to be effective. If everyone expected lies, language would break down. That trust exists at all suggests that language evolved to serve cooperation first. In conclusion, Oesch's argument reframes the function of language as primarily social rather than manipulative. While deception is part of the human communication toolkit, it is a later adaptation. The origin of language, then, is not best understood as a weapon of deceit, but as a bridge for bonding and collaboration. But deception is entering the picture when social advantage demands it.

How words can betray rational thinking

Semantic distortions arise when the meaning of words shifts according to personal beliefs, emotional states, or cultural backgrounds. While language aims to convey meaning and enable communication, words often become distorted mirrors of thought, betraying the very clarity they are supposed to offer. As Eldon Taylor explains in 'Semantic Distortions: How Words Can Betray Rational Thinking[552]', this distortion frequently happens without conscious intent, becoming part of a person's automatic cognitive processes. It operates so subtly and deeply that even trained professionals must actively guard against its influence in their thinking and language use. Semantics, the study of meaning in language, assumes that words correspond to shared concepts. But meanings are rarely fixed. Words trigger responses not only on an intellectual level but also physiologically and emotionally. A single word might produce calm in one person and anxiety in another, depending on their history, worldview, or mental state. For example, a word like 'freedom' may evoke pride and empowerment in one person, while in another, it may conjure fear of instability or loss. These divergent responses are not the result of misunderstanding or ignorance, but rather of the unique contexts in which each person forms their internal dictionary. This internal anchoring of meaning becomes dangerous when it blocks rational thought. Taylor points out that people often confuse emotional responses with logical conclusions. Words, when loaded with emotion, take on the illusion of truth. They begin to feel like facts rather than signs representing ideas. This is what Alfred Korzybski meant when he observed that modern society has become 'false to fact'. Words are mistaken for the things they name, even though they are not those things. They are symbols, limited and shaped by human interpretation. The consequences of this can be subtle or profound. For instance, terms like 'criminal', 'terrorist', or 'patriot' carry not just descriptive but evaluative weight. They create instant judgments. Someone may hear a political phrase and respond with strong emotion,

[552] Taylor, E. (2012) Semantic Distortions: How Words Can Betray Rational Thinking, HuffPost.

convinced of their interpretation's correctness, unaware that the emotional reaction itself is guiding their belief. The problem deepens when this becomes internalised. Our own self-talk—what William James called the 'stream of consciousness'—is shaped by the same semantic habits. If someone believes they are a failure, that word may become tightly anchored to shame and inadequacy, even when external evidence contradicts it. Taylor warns that this automatic distortion disables reason. Language becomes a vehicle not for truth but for reinforcing subjective narratives. Even words grounded in science or mathematics, like 'gallon' or 'equal', are not immune. A gallon of alcohol mixed with a gallon of water does not yield two gallons of liquid. The logic of quantity fails because the substances interact in complex ways. Similarly, the logic of language fails when we assume that words neatly align with reality. This problem is especially visible in public discourse. Debates around justice, equality, or freedom are often derailed not by facts, but by competing definitions. One side uses a word with one emotional and cultural meaning, while the other uses the same word with a different one. But because neither side acknowledges the distortion, dialogue fall apart. Semantic distortion becomes a wall rather than a bridge. In conclusion, semantic distortions are a deep-seated challenge to communication and rational thought. Words carry emotional, cultural, and personal baggage that shapes how they are interpreted, both by others and by oneself. These hidden forces can turn language into a tool of confusion rather than understanding. Recognising the presence of semantic distortion can help people pause before reacting, reconsider meanings, and move toward clearer, more thoughtful dialogue.

Language and distortion of reality

Language does more than describe the world; it helps build it. The words people choose, the structures of their sentences, and the meanings they attach to speech all shape what they perceive as real. Rather than serving as a neutral mirror of reality, language organises experience and gives form to what might otherwise remain vague or unseen. It guides how humans interpret the world and, just as often, how they misinterpret it. When people speak, they rely on shared systems of meaning. But this system is not fixed or transparent. Every language comes with limitations. Words are not perfect representations of things or experiences. They compress, exaggerate, or simplify what they describe. In 'Semantic Distortions' Eldon Taylor observes that the meanings attached to words are often emotional, not rational. This emotional anchoring shifts the way people understand the world and each other. This distortion becomes clearer when emotionally charged language is used. Terms like 'freedom', 'justice', or 'security' do not have single, universal definitions. Each speaker loads these terms with their own values and experiences. The result is that two people can use the same word but mean completely different things. Miscommunication occurs not because of ill will, but because language carries invisible assumptions. Language also distorts by setting boundaries. It divides reality into categories. Once a label is applied to something—'enemy', 'victim', 'expert'—it changes how others treat that person or idea. These categories are not neutral; they carry historical weight, cultural expectation, and emotional force. Labelling is a way of fixing meaning, and that fixed meaning can be used to control, limit, or mislead. Even in science or law, fields that claim objectivity, language shapes outcomes. The way data is presented, the metaphors used to describe a legal case, or the phrasing of a policy—all of these can tilt interpretation. Language gives things importance or diminishes them through tone and framing. What is not said can matter as much as what is. Silence or omission distorts reality just as much as biased words do. Everyday language also distorts internal experience. People talk to themselves using the same language patterns they hear around them. If those patterns are filled with fear, judgment, or confusion, the internal dialogue becomes distorted too. A person might describe themselves as

'a failure' not because it is true, but because the language available to them has taught them to speak in extremes or labels. Language does not have to be intentionally manipulative to distort reality. The distortion can come from vagueness, ambiguity, or habit. Sloppy language leads to sloppy thinking. Clichés, slogans, and euphemisms flatten nuance. They reduce complex issues into phrases that are easy to repeat but hard to unpack. In conclusion, language is not a passive tool. It does not simply reflect reality; it constructs it. Words frame the world. They filter what is seen, understood, and acted upon. This makes language both powerful and dangerous. It can open understanding, but it can also narrow perception and cement misunderstandings. To communicate clearly, one must be aware not only of what is being said, but of how language itself shapes what can be thought and known.

Good for lawyers and bad for scientists

Language gives people the power to persuade, argue, and construct meaning. But it is not always the best tool for describing reality. In his book 'Why Language Is Good for Lawyers and Bad for Scientists[553]', N. J. Enfield shows how language is better suited to shaping perceptions than presenting facts. Lawyers use language to argue, influence, and win cases. Scientists, by contrast, need to describe reality as precisely and clearly as possible. That makes language a double-edged sword—valuable in the courtroom, problematic in the lab. Words are rarely neutral. They do not just describe something; they frame it. A skilled lawyer can take the same set of facts and present them in multiple ways, depending on the desired outcome. By using carefully chosen words, they can evoke sympathy, suspicion, or outrage. Language here works like a spotlight, directing attention and shaping emotional reactions. It is flexible, ambiguous, and often deliberately selective. Scientists, however, need stability and clarity. Their goal is not to persuade, but to observe and explain. Yet even in science, words are essential. A scientist must describe their observations, define terms, and build arguments. But the imprecision of language introduces room for error. Terms may be misunderstood. Jargon may exclude outsiders. Vague definitions can lead to confusion or misinterpretation. In this sense, language may obscure rather than reveal the truth. Enfield also shows that language changes how people remember and think. A well-told story can stick in the mind more than raw data. Memory, influenced by the language in which it is encoded, becomes shaped by narrative. This makes language a powerful tool for propaganda, misinformation, or emotional manipulation. People often believe what they hear repeated with confidence, even if it contradicts facts. This is why language plays such a key role in politics, law, media, and advertising. The aim is rarely to tell the whole truth. Instead, language is used to shape belief, justify action, and construct meaning. In this world, ambiguity is not a problem—it is an advantage. The more room a word or phrase leaves for interpretation, the easier it is to bend its meaning to fit different goals. Scientists must resist this temptation. They aim for precision, replicability, and objectivity. That is why science often turns to mathematics and symbols to escape the ambiguity of natural language. Still, even scientific writing must use words, and that means it is never entirely free from distortion. Every description is filtered through a human mind and a cultural language. In the end, Enfield argues that language shapes not just how we communicate, but how we reason. It filters what we notice, what we remember, and how we explain things. That makes it both powerful and dangerous. Lawyers thrive in this ambiguity. Scientists struggle with it. To use language well is to understand its limits. It can persuade and inspire, but it can also mislead. It is not a mirror of reality—it is a blunt tool.

[553] Enfield, N.J. (2022) Language vs. Reality: Why Language Is Good for Lawyers and Bad for Scientists. MIT Press.

Beyond hypocrisy

Edward S. Herman's 'Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda[554]' is a sharp critique of the language and logic that underpin modern political and media discourse. The book dissects how public communication in the United States is shaped by carefully constructed doublespeak. It highlights how the meaning of words is manipulated to support state and corporate power, turning language itself into a tool of control. Through selective phrasing, euphemism, and suppression, the news becomes less a reflection of reality and more a means of shaping public opinion in favour of those already in power. Doublespeak, Herman argues, is not simply lying. It is the deliberate use of ambiguous or misleading language to obscure meaning. Euphemisms like 'enhanced interrogation', 'collateral damage', or 'regime change' serve to sanitise brutality and make it palatable. In an era where advertising, marketing, and public relations define much of the public sphere, political messaging borrows heavily from commercial language. Leaders are sold like products, and issues are framed not for clarity, but for persuasion. A central concern in the book is how media institutions align with political and economic elites. News coverage is rarely neutral. Rather, it is structured to reflect the interests of those who fund and influence media platforms—advertisers, corporations, and governments. As a result, the public often receives a distorted view of the world. This distortion is not always in the form of censorship; more often, it takes the shape of omission, misdirection, and the framing of events in ways that support official narratives. The media's role in foreign policy is a particularly strong example. Herman examines how U.S. interventions—like those in Nicaragua, El Salvador, or Iraq—are justified using moral rhetoric about democracy and human rights. Meanwhile, allied regimes committing similar or worse offenses are treated more favourably. The same actions, such as suppressing dissent or rigging elections, are condemned or excused depending on who commits them. This double standard is made possible through the manipulation of language and the repetition of official talking points across news outlets. Herman also draws attention to how the idea of 'free speech' is often hollow. While the First Amendment may protect speech in theory, real access to the public sphere is limited by money, ownership, and institutional bias. Marginal voices struggle to break through, while mainstream media serve as gatekeepers, filtering dissent and amplifying dominant views. The idea of a 'free flow of information' is undermined by the concentration of media ownership and the economic pressures that shape coverage. One of the book's most sobering insights is how propaganda can succeed not through fear or force, but through routine language and presentation. Repetition, familiarity, and the appearance of normality help reinforce the status quo. People come to accept contradiction, justify injustice, and ignore suffering, not because they are coerced, but because the language surrounding them has been engineered to do so.

The end of history?

In the chapter 'The End of History?' from 'Beyond Hypocrisy', Edward S. Herman critiques the post–Cold War narrative that the triumph of liberal democracy marked the definitive close of ideological struggle. He argues that this idea was actively shaped by media and political elites, employing 'doublespeak' and selective framing to recast history as linear and inevitable. Even as contradictions persisted the mainstream outlets endorsed this narrative revealing how propaganda, language manipulation, and hypocrisy manufacture consensus around constructed endpoints. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Western victory in the Gulf War led to a surge of confidence among political elites in the early 1990s. Many declared

[554] Herman, E.S. (1992) Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda, Boston: South End Press.

that ideological conflict had ended. Capitalism, they claimed, had triumphed for the last time. This sentiment was echoed in the belief that liberal democracy and market economies represented the final stage of human political development. But beneath this triumphalism lay deep contradictions. While the West celebrated, inequality grew, environmental crises deepened, and repression in the Global South continued, often with Western support. Edward S. Herman challenges the popular narrative that capitalism's victory marked the natural conclusion of historical development. He reminds readers that the Cold War was not simply a defence against Soviet aggression. From early interventions in the Russian Civil War to consistent opposition to Third World movements, the West acted aggressively to protect its interests. Social revolutions across Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia were often crushed through covert operations, economic warfare, or proxy wars. These were not isolated events, but part of a broader system to ensure Western dominance. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, the question shifted from 'who will contain the Soviets?' to 'who will contain the United States?' No longer constrained by a rival superpower, the U.S. expanded its global influence through military might, economic coercion, and alliances with compliant local elites. The language of democracy and free markets often masked policies that entrenched inequality and served corporate interests. The belief that market reforms would lead to prosperity has not held true for much of the world. In many regions, 'reform' meant dismantling previous gains in labour rights, public services, and social protection. The result was growing poverty, instability, and frustration. In this context, the market became an ideology in itself—unchallenged and self-justifying. Meanwhile, the West continued to rewrite history, casting itself as the defender of liberty while suppressing dissent and undermining popular movements. Environmental degradation has also accelerated under this market triumphalism. With growth and profit as central values, ecosystems are increasingly sacrificed for short-term gains. Governments often lack the strength or will to resist corporate pressure. The result is a global economy that consumes natural resources at an unsustainable rate, leaving the planet more vulnerable each year. Western policies, particularly during the Reagan and Bush administrations, emphasised deregulation and corporate expansion over environmental stewardship. Herman argues that the most profound threats today come not from failed ideologies but from unchecked power. The real struggle is not between capitalism and communism, but between the powerful and the powerless. The real locus of power today is not the battlefield or the parliament—it is language itself. As Edward S. Herman shows, deregulated corporate power has not merely privatised material space but has colonised virtual public space: mass media, search engines, and social networks where meaning is made and controlled. This is no longer just propaganda—it is a regime of 'discourse management', where dominant actors use doublespeak dictionaries to redefine reality. Like Humpty Dumpty, they declare that words mean what they choose them to mean, reshaping history, truth, and public consciousness through sheer repetition and framing. In this world, the greatest power of all is the power to define—to command not just resources or armies, but the language through which people understand themselves, others, and the world they live in. Language, in the hands of power, serves not to clarify but to obscure. If power is the opposite of love, then true love is silent.

To fear or fear not

There is a popular claim circulating online that the most repeated phrase across all religious texts is 'Do not be afraid'. While this may not be literally true—textual counts suggest otherwise—the emotional impact of these words is undeniable. Why do people respond so deeply to them? Because they are afraid. But what exactly do they fear? Is it real danger in the world—or the words themselves, spoken by those in power, designed to instil fear? Fear is not

merely a biological response to physical threats; it is also a linguistic construct, crafted and reinforced through language by figures of authority. From parents to priests, shamans to presidents, people in power have long used words to shape fear. Sometimes it is protective: 'Don't touch the fire'. But often it becomes manipulative: 'Obey, or you'll suffer eternal damnation'. In such cases, language does not describe fear—it produces it. Daniel Everett's 'Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes' offers a striking contrast to how fear can be communicated differently. Among the Pirahã people of the Amazon, the phrase 'Don't sleep, there are snakes' is a common way to say goodnight. On the surface, it might sound threatening, but it is said with warmth and even laughter. It is meant to keep one alert to real dangers in the jungle, not to paralyze or dominate. The speaker is not trying to assert power over the listener, but rather to express communal care. The message is simple: be cautious, stay alive, but do not let fear consume you. There is no sermon, no punishment, no manipulation—only a shared awareness of reality. This example reveals a crucial distinction: fear can be rooted in love or wielded as control. The same words—'Be careful', 'Don't go there', 'Watch out'—can either protect or oppress, depending on the intent behind them and the emotional connection between speaker and listener. In the worst cases, language itself becomes the threat. When religious or political figures speak of enemies, punishment, or damnation, it is often not reality people fear—but the power of the words themselves. The voice of authority becomes more frightening than the danger it supposedly warns against. Ironically, the phrase 'Fear not' often emerges from this same tradition of authoritative speech. In religious texts, divine figures or angels usually utter it. Whether spoken to Abraham, Mary, or shepherds, it always comes at a moment of tension—when divine presence risks overwhelming the human psyche. But the command 'Fear not' is not merely comfort. It is also an instruction to resist the language of fear itself. In the Bible, it is not just the physical danger that must be overcome, but the psychological grip of fear—the kind that enslaves rather than enlightens. In this sense, the true enemy may not be danger itself, but the misuse of language to produce fear. When the words are crafted to dominate, to threaten, or to bind the listener to obedience, then fear becomes a tool of oppression. As Everett suggests through the Pirahã way of speaking, words can also prepare without terrifying, caution without controlling, and speak truth without manipulation. So, the deeper message of 'Fear not' may not be divine reassurance in the face of danger—it may be a linguistic rebellion. A reminder not to submit to the voice that uses fear to rule. Not to fear the jungle, but to fear the mouth that twists it into myth. And above all, not to fear the world more than the words spoken about it. The most important message in any act of speaking should be this: fear not the speaker, nor the words, nor the intentions behind them. In shared life, protection flows both ways—mutual care replaces domination. True danger lies not in language, but in what creeps silently in the dark: the snakes, the spiders, the real threats. Fear only what deserves fear. Empty words and hollow threats should hold no power. Let speech prepare, not paralyze.

5.2. Discomunication

(The end of fellowship: How communication becomes its own absence)

'Misunderstanding is not the failure of communication—it is its fundamental mode'.

— John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air

'Communication has collapsed into its opposite: the administration of silence'.

— Jean Baudrillard, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities

'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet... this is not to say that there is no communication, but rather that communication is the stake in every relation of power'.

— Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume I

Discommunication

Discommunication is more than a refusal to speak. It is the deliberate dismantling of communion itself. The prefix 'dis-' carries the force of separation—apart, away, undone. When joined with 'communication', which shares roots with 'communion', it signifies not just a lapse in speech but the violent severing of a shared world. If communication is what makes society, family, and friendship possible, then discommunication is its undoing. It is not just silence, but strategic silence with the intent to isolate, dominate, and injure. It does not signify peace or retreat. Rather, it enacts a form of social death. The common concept of the silent treatment often disguises the deeper pathology of discommunication. It is usually defined as the withholding of speech following conflict. But this passive gesture becomes active when silence is used not to de-escalate tension or create space for reflection, but as a means of punishment. In this sense, discommunication is not about withdrawal but control. The discommunicator seeks to destabilise the other, to induce doubt, guilt, and anxiety by removing the possibility of dialogue. What remains is not a pause, but a void—one that the discommunicated person tries desperately to fill with explanations, apologies, or pleading. This psychological vacuum is the weapon. Without clear terms, the discommunicated subject spins in confusion. Discommunication operates by leveraging dependence. When the person on the receiving end relies on the discommunicator—emotionally, socially, or economically—the silence becomes not only unbearable but disorienting. There is no feedback, no recognition, no path forward. The subject is not simply ignored; they are unacknowledged. The impact is one of internal fragmentation, where the basic human need for connection is met with a denial so total it destabilises identity itself. At its core, discommunication is an act of domination masquerading as absence. The discommunicator does not merely disappear. They haunt. Their silence is not empty but filled with implication: that the other is unworthy, flawed, or irredeemable. And because there is no conversation, there is no way to contest, clarify, or repair. The silence becomes a trap. It disarms the target while maintaining the discommunicator's moral superiority. The longer the silence persists, the more power it acquires. In high-conflict relationships—especially those involving narcissistic or borderline personality traits—discommunication becomes a repeated pattern. It is not a breakdown but a tactic. Used cyclically, it conditions the other person into compliance, fear, or desperation. The unpredictability of communication followed by its abrupt withdrawal mimics the dynamics of emotional abuse. The victim internalises the silence, questioning their worth and seeking endlessly to regain favour. In this way, discommunication constructs a hierarchy where speech and recognition become privileges to be granted or withheld. But the harm extends beyond the private sphere. At the societal level, discommunication emerges in practices of exclusion, cancellation, and exile. Political and cultural life increasingly mirrors this tactic. Rather than engage with dissent, people withdraw, silence, block, and erase. Dialogue is replaced with

judgment rendered through absence. What cannot be controlled through debate is managed by disengagement. The result is a public life fractured by mutual disacknowledgement. Different groups no longer miscommunicate—they cease communicating altogether. Discommunication, at this scale, becomes the architecture of polarisation. The social effects are corrosive. Without dialogue, there is no trust. Without trust, no solidarity. And without solidarity, society fragments into isolated enclaves of self-reinforcing belief. Each group regards the others not as opponents to be persuaded but as enemies to be ignored. The communal fabric unravels. What remains are individuals speaking only to themselves, or only to those who mirror them. In this way, discommunication does not simply silence—it amputates. The psychological cost is borne by those most in need of recognition. To be discommunicated is to be rendered invisible. It is to occupy a space without name, without voice, without address. In familial or intimate contexts, this can resemble abandonment. In public life, it can resemble censorship. But the mechanism is the same: the refusal to relate. And with that refusal, one denies the basic conditions of shared human life. Discommunication is therefore not merely the opposite of communication—it is its negation. Where communication builds bridges, discommunication tears them down. It is the wilful destruction of reciprocity, the closing of the channel that makes mutual understanding possible. It does not aim to clarify but to obscure, not to resolve but to control. It does not forget—it erases. To resist discommunication is not merely to speak again. It is to refuse the logic of severance. It is to insist on presence, even when unwelcome. To reach out, even when rejected. True communion requires vulnerability, recognition, and risk. Discommunication avoids all three. That is its appeal—and its danger.

Punitive silence

Discommunication is more than mere silence. It is a deliberate and often abusive withdrawal of communication. Unlike a misunderstanding, discommunication signifies a breakdown in the bonds that link us, and more than a failure to speak, it reflects a collapse of community bonds. This tactic goes beyond simple disagreement. It is an intentional, controlling act designed to punish. The silent treatment might look like a temporary pause in contact. But discommunication is strategic. It creates anxiety, confusion, and a constant scramble to reconnect—while the discommunicator remains resolute in their silence. They exploit the natural need for social interaction to assert power and dominance. In highly charged relationships—especially those involving narcissists or individuals with borderline traits—discommunication becomes a weapon. The silent period may start after a minor disagreement. But the longer it goes on, the more the victim questions themselves, searching for explanations and ways to make things right. Without any clarity or resolution provided by the other person, that anxiety only grows. The result is emotional distress and an unbalanced power dynamic. This form of control is subtle yet insidious. Silence replaces conversation. The target is left without context or closure. They experience loneliness, self-doubt, anxiety, and potentially damaged self-esteem. Over time, the silence communicates a message louder than any words: 'You are not worth engaging with'. These patterns have been widely examined. Psychologist Kipling Williams notes that silent treatment causes intense emotional pain, sometimes rivalling physical suffering. Targets often speak of feeling invisible or erased from someone’s mind. In families, this tactic can fracture trust. Silent parents, for example, may experience short-term authority, but long-term damage to the child’s sense of security and communication. Discommunication affects not only the recipient but also the one imposing it. Recent studies by Shilpi Agarwal and Nidhi Prakash found that people who use silent treatment often carry guilt, stress, and tension. Even perpetrators may feel weighed down by their own avoidance of resolution. Yet they persist, using discommunication as a method to control and evade conflict.

Healing from discommunication takes intention and courage. The first step is recognition: naming the behaviour for what it is, not excuse it as a simple argument. Victims need to set boundaries and ask for resolution—explicitly asking for clarity about why communication ceased and how it can resume. Without these clear terms, silence remains a form of emotional captivity, not a path toward reconciliation. In toxic relationships, walking away may be the healthiest option. Re-establishing communication only works when the discommunicator commits to open dialogue. Otherwise, silence will be used again at the next disagreement. Discommunication is a form of communal breakdown. It weaponises silence to fracture trust, damage emotional well-being, and dissolve meaningful bonds. It turns absence into a statement, withdrawal into punishment. Recognising this tactic empowers both targets and observers to respond decisively—whether through repair, resistance, or removal from harmful cycles. Silence alone should never replace understanding and mutual respect in a community.

Collapse of dialogue

Discommunication, as an active withdrawal from dialogue, is not merely a private interpersonal strategy. It is a sociological rupture, a linguistic severing that simulates connection while enacting isolation. Where communication traditionally serves to build bonds—familial, communal, tribal—discommunication mimics these structures through performative signals while dissolving the very fabric of mutual understanding. At its core, discommunication weaponises the shell of language. It does not speak to convey meaning, but to control, discipline, and isolate. This makes it a social pathology, an imitation of sociality that functions as its denial. Originating as an extension of the psychological phenomenon known as the 'silent treatment', discommunication has become a widespread social tool. The silent treatment is typically defined as a refusal to engage verbally with someone following a conflict. It expresses disapproval and withdrawal. But discommunication goes further. It is not the absence of speech per se, but the active deployment of silence or empty language—commands, slogans, formalities—as a way of withholding communion. In this sense, it mirrors what Edward T. Hall called the 'silent language', a system of nonverbal cues that transmit culture and social expectations beneath the level of conscious awareness. But while Hall emphasised how these cues enable understanding, discommunication uses silence and minimalism to suppress it. In a society increasingly structured around digital communication, algorithmic speech, and bureaucratic interaction, discommunication becomes normalised. The speech acts of institutions, corporations, and even individuals begin to resemble machine language—directives without dialogue, responses without reciprocity. Phrases such as 'Your call is important to us', 'Thoughts and prayers', or 'As per our policy' operate as signs that simulate care or engagement, but do not build a relational bond. They are placeholders, signals in a system that prefers simulation over communion. These linguistic structures, far from facilitating understanding, function as shields behind which the speaker hides from the responsibilities of response. Viewed sociologically, discommunication signals the erosion of Gemeinschaft—community grounded in organic bonds—in favour of Gesellschaft—mechanical association based on function and exchange. In familial and tribal societies, silence holds a sacred value as a space of reflection or ritual. But in modern societies, silence often becomes a power play, used to withhold recognition. In abusive relationships, for example, discommunication is used to trigger panic, doubt, and cognitive dissonance. The silence is not neutral; it is charged with the threat of abandonment. It echoes with unspoken condemnation. The victim is left in a psychological wilderness, isolated not by physical distance but by linguistic exile. This form of linguistic abandonment has broader social consequences. It contributes to what Guy Debord called the 'society of the spectacle', where genuine human interaction is replaced by

representations. Just as images substitute for experience, empty language substitutes for communion. Discommunication is a type of doublespeak in the Orwellian sense: it expresses the opposite of what it claims. It says 'we care' through standardised platitudes that eliminate any possibility of care. It says 'you matter' through systems that make response impossible. In this sense, discommunication is not only anti-social—it is post-social. Discommunication also intersects with ideology. In political discourse, public relations, and institutional rhetoric, language becomes increasingly dissociated from truth and mutual recognition. Instead, it becomes instrumental. Language is reduced to slogans, policy jargon, and euphemisms. It no longer seeks understanding but compliance. Here, discommunication does not mean silence in the literal sense, but the presence of speech that silences—the flood of empty language that drowns meaningful dialogue. In this way, it mirrors the logic of command systems, where speech acts as a trigger rather than an invitation. The danger of discommunication is not just alienation, but the gradual erasure of the human as a communicative being. Language is not simply a tool for transmitting information. It is a social organ, a bond between people, a space in which recognition, disagreement, and reconciliation take place. When language ceases to be dialogical, humans cease to be communal. What remains is a network of monads, signalling to each other in scripts devoid of reciprocity. In a world dominated by surveillance, automation, and performative discourse, the risk is not merely miscommunication but miscommunion. Discommunication becomes the default—an absence of speech masked by the appearance of endless interaction. People tweet, post, message, reply—but often without communion. They speak into the void, or worse, into an echo chamber that only reflects their own image. Society begins to resemble a machine with social gestures: it processes signals but does not form relationships. Discommunication is not the breakdown of communication but its imitation. It uses the language of community to enforce distance. It uses the silence of reflection as a punishment. It mimics the speech of intimacy to obscure estrangement. To restore true communication, one must return to the ethic of dialogue: the willingness to listen, to respond, and to risk misunderstanding in the pursuit of shared meaning. Without this, society is no longer a community of people—it becomes a simulation of one. Discommunication replaces genuine dialogue with scripted gestures that imitate connection while enforcing separation. In simulating speech, it severs the social bonds language is meant to sustain. When speech is staged, the bond is broken; a voice without truth builds no bridge.

NLP Milton Model

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) often presents itself as a therapeutic tool for personal development and communication. However, at its core lies a systematic strategy of discommunication—language designed not to clarify, but to guide, blur, and manipulate. One of the most powerful and influential components of NLP is the Milton Model, inspired by the techniques of psychiatrist Milton H. Erickson. This model uses hypnotic and metaphorical language to bypass critical reasoning, subtly shape perception, and induce states of suggestibility. What appears as linguistic artistry often operates as a controlled distortion of dialogue—disguised influence cloaked in therapeutic intent. Milton Hyland Erickson (1901–1980) was a pivotal figure in the development of clinical hypnosis. His personal story—marked by early dyslexia, colour blindness, and a severe bout of polio—shaped his unorthodox understanding of human behaviour and communication. Rather than adhering to rigid Freudian models of the unconscious, Erickson viewed the unconscious as a flexible and resourceful ally capable of generating creative solutions. He believed that trance states were natural, everyday experiences and used indirect, permissive techniques—such as metaphor, humour, double binds, and confusion—to access this inner intelligence. Unlike authoritarian forms of hypnosis,

Erickson's approach emphasised subtlety: he would tell symbolic stories or embed therapeutic suggestions in casual conversation. His capacity to observe behaviour and respond with linguistic precision allowed him to circumvent resistance and communicate with patients' unconscious minds. The therapeutic alliance was built not on confrontation, but on rapport, indirectness, and ambiguity. This indirect approach became the foundation for the NLP Milton Model—a structured attempt to replicate Erickson's hypnotic language patterns. The NLP Milton Model is a formalised toolkit of Ericksonian language strategies. Created by Richard Bandler and John Grinder, the model systematises the 'magical' quality of Erickson's speech into identifiable, repeatable patterns. These include presuppositions, nominalisations, lack of referential specificity, and metaphorical framing—all aimed at inducing trance and bypassing conscious resistance. Unlike the NLP Meta Model, which seeks to recover precision and challenge vagueness, the Milton Model embraces vagueness. Its goal is not to analyse but to influence—subtly and often invisibly. At the heart of the model is a core assumption: that every behaviour serves a positive intention, and that people already have the internal resources they need to solve their problems. The role of the practitioner, then, is to facilitate access to those resources—not through logical explanation but through suggestive, permissive language. Phrases like 'You may begin to wonder how easily change can happen' or 'Some part of you already knows what to do' are typical. These utterances do not demand action; they evoke internal search, blur agency, and encourage compliance without resistance. Used skillfully, they create an illusion of autonomy while steering the subject's response. In this sense, the Milton Model exemplifies discommunication: it simulates openness and collaboration while controlling meaning through linguistic sleight of hand. Its elegance lies in its capacity to guide thought covertly. But this same elegance raises ethical concerns. By deliberately avoiding clarity and embedding suggestion, the model can easily become a tool of manipulation. Its power lies not just in what is said, but in what remains unsaid—what is implied, presupposed, or left open to unconscious completion. As a linguistic structure, the Milton Model reveals how language can be weaponised not through aggression but through gentleness. It teaches that discommunication is not always loud or forceful—it can be soft, seductive, and persuasive. What begins as therapeutic rapport can become a closed loop of influence, where ambiguity serves not as freedom but as control.

Conspicuous discommunication

In today's coaching and personal development industries, language is not just a vehicle of expression—it is a carefully engineered tool for influence. A striking example of this is found in the work of Al and Marilyn Sargent, whose article 'The Milton-Model: The Language of Influence and Being Artfully Vague[555]' offers a detailed guide to using deliberately ambiguous language patterns for persuasion. Marketed as a means for enhancing communication, what emerges instead is a system of controlled suggestion designed to bypass rational resistance. Rather than fostering mutual understanding or genuine dialogue, the language of the Milton Model operates as a mechanism for soft coercion, cloaked in the appearance of empathy and empowerment. Behind the polished jargon of 'unconscious competence' and 'nominalisations' lies a sophisticated linguistic strategy that, intentionally or not, treats people as means rather than ends. At the core of this system is the deliberate deletion, distortion, and generalisation of meaning. The NLP Milton Model borrows heavily from the hypnotic techniques of Milton

[555] Sargent, A. and Sargent, M. (2021) The Milton-Model: The Language of Influence and Being Artfully Vague. Success Design International. Available at: https://www.repoweryourlife.com (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

Erickson yet strips them of therapeutic context and repurposes them for performance and manipulation. Nominalisations, such as 'healing', 'growth', or 'transformation', are used not to clarify goals, but to obscure them—relying on the client to project their own meaning into the void. The speaker makes statements so vague that they appear meaningful while concealing any fixed content. A sentence like, 'You may already be aware of the resources inside you', appears supportive, but in truth it avoids saying anything at all. It is precisely this vagueness that makes it so effective—it allows the speaker to imply insight, authority, and resonance without ever being held accountable for precision. This strategy of discommunication—communication that simulates dialogue while evading its responsibilities—is embedded in every linguistic pattern of the Milton Model. For example, unspecified referential indices ('people can change') and unspecified verbs ('you can begin to experience') shift the burden of interpretation onto the listener. They are compelled to supply their own content, which creates the illusion that the speaker understands them deeply. In fact, the speaker understands nothing—they merely reflect, like a mirror, the listener's projections. Instead of genuine intersubjectivity, we find a closed circuit of self-reinforcing suggestion. Other tactics further reinforce this asymmetry. The use of presuppositions ('Before you realise how easy it is to change.') smuggles assumptions into discourse without opening them to question. Pacing and leading sequences—where obvious truths are followed by subtle suggestions—create agreement through structural manipulation. Embedded commands and tag questions ('You're feeling more focused now, aren't you?') embed suggestions inside the form of ordinary speech, bypassing critical faculties. These techniques are not random—they are consciously taught, practiced, and deployed, often under the guise of helping others. The effect of this language is not neutral. It masks authority in empathy, sells compliance as freedom, and replaces mutual understanding with subtle domination. Clients or listeners may feel empowered, but what they often experience is guided compliance: their inner world reorganised not through understanding, but through suggestion. In this way, the Milton Model becomes a tool not for communion, but for control—language used not to meet others in shared meaning, but to steer them toward goals they did not choose, framed as their own desires. Discommunication, in this form, is not a breakdown but a design. It is conspicuous because it hides in plain sight, wrapped in smiles and smooth voices, laced with metaphors of growth while narrowing the space for genuine response. To speak artfully vague is not always innocent—it can be a strategy to possess the listener's attention while quietly bypassing their judgment. In such a system, the goal is not dialogue, but influence; not truth, but effect.

'Alice in Wonderland' technique

The so-called 'Alice in Wonderland' technique is often traced back to a Scientology training drill known as 'Dear Alice', devised by L. Ron Hubbard. In this exercise, practitioners would read passages from 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' aloud, aiming to deliver them as though they were their own words, with natural tone, pacing, and conviction. During Scientology's 'Operation Snow White' (a covert effort to infiltrate government institutions and eliminate unfavourable information about the church)— deceptive and manipulative tactics were employed, including fabricating narratives and silencing dissent. 'Alice in Wonderland' technique later appeared almost word-for-word in the 1963 CIA manual[556] KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation. The whimsical nonsense of Lewis Carroll's text provided an ideal template for confusion-based interrogation methods, potentially influencing not only

[556] C.I.A. (2018) The Official C.I.A. Interrogation & Manipulation Manual: The Cold War KUBARK Files. Carlile Media, p. 77.

intelligence work but also certain media strategies aimed at unsettling audiences before supplying a ‘solution’. The 'Alice in Wonderland' technique was not merely a matter of reading aloud; it involved controlling tone, pacing, and intention until the delivery appeared entirely authentic to the listener. The whimsical absurdity of the text was deliberate, offering a constantly changing range of emotional tones that forced the mind to adjust. The essential skill was to project authority and certainty even when articulating nonsense. In its coercive application, the technique uses confusion as the primary gateway to influence. When a person's internal scripts—those mental routines that enable them to make sense of daily life—are disrupted by contradictory, chaotic, or emotionally disorienting inputs, their mind enters a temporary suspension. In that state, the brain, desperate for stability, attaches itself to the first coherent idea it encounters. This idea may be factual, fictitious, or entirely fabricated. Once the initial 'anchor' is accepted, subsequent suggestions are more readily embraced until the subject ceases to evaluate and begins to absorb. The method proved so effective that it appeared, almost verbatim, in mid-twentieth-century interrogation manuals, where it was repurposed as a 'softening' tool to dismantle existing mental frameworks and replace them with new ones—not to discover truth, but to substitute it. Contemporary digital environments replicate this process on a mass scale. Rather than experiencing a single disorienting exchange, individuals are exposed to a rapid sequence of stimuli: political outrage, an inspirational recovery narrative, luxury product advertising, a tragic confession, followed by humour. This deliberate 'emotional cycling' destabilises mental equilibrium, diminishing the capacity for critical reasoning and increasing receptivity to whatever message follows. Although presented as entertainment, the underlying objective is to fragment attention, exhaust logical faculties, and maintain a state of emotional volatility—conditions highly conducive to persuasion. Each peak and crash in emotional state primes the mind for the insertion of a narrative, whether in the form of a commercial offer, political slogan, or identity-based proposition. The operational sequence is consistent: disorder first, order second—for a price. The 'solution' provided after confusion is seldom confined to factual information; it is more often a lifestyle, a sense of belonging, or an entirely new identity. The recipient is told they are not merely acquiring a product or method, but becoming part of an exclusive group, distinct from the supposed masses outside it. Fear, hope, guilt, belonging, and renewed fear follow one another in a calculated loop. Research indicates that rapid emotional shifts can increase vulnerability to persuasive communication by nearly half, particularly when delivered by figures perceived as authoritative. Once the individual's identity is linked to the message, compliance becomes predictable: disagreement ceases to be a matter of opinion and becomes a threat to the self. What began as a theatrical reading drill could have evolved into a method of behavioural engineering embedded in advertising, influencer culture, political propaganda, and algorithmically curated digital content. The principle remains unchanged whether in an interrogation room or on a social media feed: disorient, insert, and reinforce. As the human brain has not adapted to filter such sustained novelty and manipulation, resistance is minimal. The 'Alice in Wonderland' technique is no longer concerned with teaching people to speak convincingly—it is concerned with determining what they believe, how they perceive themselves, and ultimately, who they become. The problem with this technique is that the 'interrogators' can become lost in the very depths of the 'rabbit hole' themselves. Falling into the Humpty Dumpty trap mens believing you command language, when in reality it commands you.

'Contrariwise', continued Tweedledee, 'if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn’t, it ain’t. That’s logic.'- Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871)

Language as torture

In her article[557] 'Terrifying laughter: interrogation in Pinter's The Birthday Party and the CIA's 'Alice in Wonderland' (2021), Katja Stroke-Adolphe examines how Harold Pinter's theatrical interrogation scenes uncannily echo real-world torture methods described in the CIA's KUBARK Interrogation and Counterintelligence Manual. Published in Textual Practice, the study draws on theatre analysis, political history, and testimony from Mohamedou Ould Slahi's Guantánamo Diary to show how nonsense, humour, and ontological destabilisation function as tools of both dramatic tension and psychological assault. Stroke-Adolphe situates Pinter's The Birthday Party in a disturbing continuum where organised linguistic confusion is deployed not to uncover truth, but to dismantle identity and enforce submission. In Pinter's interrogation scenes, language functions as both a weapon and a theatre of confusion. The interrogators Goldberg and McCann use torrents of language that appear meaningless yet operate with precision to unsettle and dominate. By dismantling logical continuity, they compel both Stanley—their victim—and the audience to search for a coherent "line" in the chaos. This search for order in disorder, for culpability in ambiguity, reproduces the interrogator's mindset: the compulsion to impose clarity through control, even at the cost of truth. Pinter thus turns theatrical indeterminacy into a mechanism of complicity. Laughter plays a central role in this dynamic. In the theatre, nonsensical exchanges can initially provoke humour, but that laughter quickly curdles when the audience realises it participates in the violence. This parallels the CIA's recognition that laughter can be an initial response to disorientation—a momentary release—before confusion becomes unbearable. In both theatre and interrogation, humour is a trap: a reflex that exposes vulnerability, signalling that destabilisation is working. Mohamedou Ould Slahi's 'Guantánamo Diary' provides a real-world account of this process. Subjected to a "special interrogation plan" that included isolation, humiliation, and staged absurdities, Slahi witnessed how interrogators relied on repetition, performance, and farcical role-play—often lifted from pop culture fantasies—to sustain the illusion of omnipotence. Like Goldberg and McCann, they insisted on rigid adherence to an "organisation's" line, embedding themselves in a fantasy of absolute order that masked their incompetence. Over time, their absurd scripts lost their power, becoming objects of ridicule to detainees. Yet the damage was already done: identity eroded, autonomy stripped away, reality replaced by a manufactured one. Pinter's stagecraft captures this cyclical collapse. Stanley's speech degrades under pressure; his questions vanish, his responses become disconnected sounds, and his sense of self dissolves until even his name is replaced by the nonsense label "Joe Soap." This "regression" aligns with the CIA's definition: a reversal of psychological development, reducing the subject to an infantile state. In 'The Birthday Party', the "birthday" is thus no celebration but a rebirth into the identity assigned by the interrogators—a reconstructed self designed for obedience. The brilliance—and horror—of Pinter's construction lies in how it implicates the audience in this process. By withholding definitive meaning, he makes them feel the interrogated's desperation to resolve confusion, and the interrogator's urge to impose it. Every laugh, every attempt to decode, mirrors the mechanics of control. The theatrical absurd thus reveals itself as a precise simulation of organised discommunication. The intersection of Pinter's art and the CIA's methods demonstrates that the confusion tactic is not confined to black sites and interrogation rooms; it belongs to a larger machinery of language manipulation. When the most powerful

[557] Katja Stroke-Adolphe (2021). Terrifying laughter: interrogation in Pinter's The Birthday Party and the CIA's 'Alice in Wonderland'. Textual Practice, 37(1), pp.44–67. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236x.2021.1971753.

state apparatus in the world refines techniques of nonsense, indeterminacy, and destabilisation, these tools risk infecting public discourse itself. Once embedded, the "virus" of discommunication can spread through media, politics, and culture, reshaping how language functions at its core. This infection does not remain under the control of its creators. As with a Pandora's box, the release of linguistic destabilisation cannot be reversed. It mutates, slipping beyond the grasp of those who first deployed it—whether CIA strategists or playwrights experimenting with ambiguity. What begins as an instrument of power can corrode the very structures that wield it, turning organised confusion into a general condition. In such a world, neither governments nor artists can claim immunity: the techniques they unleash will eventually interrogate them too. By pairing the CIA manual's conditions of 'shock, disorientation, profound fear, loss of self' with the staged confusion and paranoia of interrogation, theatre confronts the audience with their own complicity. In the society of the spectacle, where torture and killing are consumed as entertainment, language in mass society shatters any pretence to innocence. Language is never neutral; it renders you an unwilling accomplice. All who speak or listen belong to a "language regime"—and in that belonging, all are implicated in the crimes committed in its name.

Linguistic logic of social suicide

In his 1897 work 'Le Suicide: Étude de sociologie', Émile Durkheim defined suicide not simply as an individual act but as a deeply social phenomenon. He argued that suicide rates reflect the moral health of society, and that certain forms—such as egoistic, anomic, or altruistic suicide—arise from breakdowns in the individual's relation to the collective. Yet Durkheim framed this in sociological terms, as a matter of regulation and integration, not language. What happens, however, if suicide is understood linguistically—not only as a symptom of social disorder but as a communicative process, one that begins with words, narratives, and internal dialogues? Suicide, both individual and social, may be seen as a discursive act. It emerges from the failure of language to sustain communion, and from the rise of discommunication: a rupture in the shared symbolic world that holds people and societies together. Discommunication is not merely the absence of speech or understanding. It is a mode of symbolic severance. It occurs when the common codes that sustain mutual recognition and solidarity dissolve, and when language ceases to function as a medium of communion. Unlike simple miscommunication, which may still occur within a shared frame of reference, discommunication signals the loss of that frame altogether. In this sense, discommunication is not just a failure of meaning but a symptom of collective estrangement—a precondition for social suicide. Durkheim linked suicide to what he called anomie, a condition in which social norms lose their binding force, leaving individuals unmoored and disoriented. Anomic suicide arises when rapid social change disrupts the moral regulation of life. But in linguistic terms, anomie is a loss of narrative coherence. The individual no longer inhabits a shared story. Words cease to offer orientation. Meaning becomes unstable, contradictory, or altogether void. Under these conditions, suicide is not merely a reaction to suffering—it is a logical, even rational, conclusion to a breakdown in the communicative function of language. The individual decides to end life because no language remains in which life continues to make sense. This process scales. What occurs in the soul of one person may occur in the body of the whole. Societies that commit suicide do so through their discourse. The decay of political speech, the rise of cynical slogans, the multiplication of contradictory ideologies, and the erosion of ethical language all point to a symbolic disintegration. In such environments, public discourse becomes less about truth or understanding and more about control, spectacle, or despair. Language fragments into tribes. Each speaks to itself, and no one listens to the other. Dialogue becomes impossible. This is

discommunication—not silence, but noise without meaning. It is the linguistic equivalent of Durkheim's anomie: speech stripped of communion. Signs of this process appear not only in political rhetoric but in art, literature, and popular culture. Decadent art movements do not merely reflect aesthetic innovation; they often signal a crisis in meaning. Transgressive language becomes a way to mimic or defy the very norms that have lost their power. Artistic provocations, nihilistic slogans, ironic performances, and stylistic fragmentation reflect the collapse of a stable symbolic order. When words no longer bind people to shared commitments or aspirations, art and speech begin to mirror the void. They simulate life at the edge of meaning, rehearsing the logic of collapse. This is not a moral judgment but a semiotic one. When language becomes purely performative or reflexive, it ceases to refer to a common world. In such contexts, suicide—individual or collective—ceases to be an unthinkable act. It becomes narratively plausible. It becomes framed as a solution, a sacrifice, a protest, or a final gesture of agency. This narrative logic is embedded in the language itself. People speak of burnout, apocalypse, endgames, and collapse with a tone of resigned clarity. It is no longer unutterable that society might destroy itself. In fact, it is often already narrated. Words precede the act. The suicide is, in a real sense, already written. This is the danger of discommunication. When language ceases to be shared, it no longer preserves society—it prepares its disintegration. The rituals of speech, the slow work of interpretation, the ethical care of listening—these are the practices that make community possible. Their absence is not neutral. It creates a void that is soon filled by the cold logic of exit, withdrawal, or destruction. Durkheim understood that suicide is not only about despair but about meaning. It occurs when meaning fails to bind the self to the social. In linguistic terms, it occurs when the inner voice—already shaped by public language—finds no reason to continue. To prevent suicide, then, is to sustain a language in which life remains liveable. This applies to individuals and to societies alike. Discommunication names the moment before the fall when language still exists but no longer communicates. It is the simulation of speech, the imitation of communion. It offers commands, slogans, and echo chambers—but no understanding. In such a world, suicide is not only possible. It becomes predictable. And unless the symbolic tissue is rewoven—through acts of speech that genuinely seek communion—it becomes inevitable.

5.3. Language and sanity

(Naming the unsane: How labels distort thought)

'We do not deal with the world itself but with maps of the world, and these maps are constructed by language'.

— S.I. Hayakawa

'Words are not things, and meaning is not found in dictionaries'.

— Wendell Johnson,

'Science and Sanity'

Alfred Korzybski's 'Science and Sanity[558]' presents a deep critique of how language shapes human understanding and distorts perception. Everyday language is not only inadequate for scientific inquiry but also responsible for many of the misunderstandings and irrational behaviours. Language, as a symbolic system, necessarily abstracts from reality, and in doing so, distorts it. Humans too often forget this, confusing words with the things they represent. Language does not mirror reality directly. Words are abstractions—maps, not the territory. Yet humans often act as if the word is the thing, ignoring the layered abstractions that stand between perception and the world. This tendency leads to 'semantic confusion', a condition where individuals react to words and categories rather than to specific, lived experiences. One of the core distinctions Korzybski made was between the 'insane' and the 'unsane'. The insane are pathologically detached from reality, but the unsane are simply misaligned. Their thinking is shaped by language habits that encourage rigid categories and static ideas. For example, labelling a person as 'smart' reduces a dynamic, changing human being to a fixed trait. This reduction leads not only to judgment but to misunderstanding and conflict. The 'unsane' person is not mad but trapped in a language that oversimplifies the world. Korzybski believed that this problem was systemic. The structure of natural languages, inherited from Aristotelian logic, relies heavily on binary distinctions and static definitions. These features are useful for managing daily life, but they are poorly suited to grasping complex, dynamic systems. Science, he argued, needs a different kind of language—one capable of representing relationships, processes, and degrees of change, rather than fixed essences. To move beyond these limitations, Korzybski called for a 'non-Aristotelian' system of thought. This would involve re-educating human perception through what he called 'consciousness of abstracting'—a mental discipline that reminds people they are always working with incomplete representations. He encouraged practices like indexing, dating, and using qualifiers to prevent generalisation. Instead of saying 'John is a liar', one might say 'John-2020 told a lie in this situation', recognising time and context as crucial factors in meaning. These practices were not only intellectual exercises but tools for mental hygiene. Korzybski saw semantic habits as deeply tied to emotional and behavioural patterns. When people misidentify symbols as reality, they are more likely to engage in reactionary or irrational behaviour. By refining the way people speak and think, general semantics aimed to improve human sanity—hence the book's title. Korzybski also believed that scientific disciplines could benefit from greater attention to semantics. Mathematics and physics already operate within tightly defined symbolic systems. Yet even these fields are not immune to semantic confusion when they stray into metaphor or public explanation. A more precise, structurally aware use of language could help prevent errors and clarify communication, especially in fields that deal with abstract or probabilistic phenomena. The influence of *Science and Sanity* extends beyond science. It resonates in fields such as media studies, psychology, and philosophy. Its insistence on the provisional nature of meaning, and the dangers of mistaking linguistic maps for reality, anticipated later concerns in post-structuralism and cognitive science. Yet Korzybski remained committed to the possibility of improvement. He was not a sceptic but a reformer. He believed that by becoming more aware of how language works, people could become less reactive, more reflective, and more responsible. In a world where political rhetoric, advertising, and mass communication increasingly shape collective reality, Korzybski's warning remains relevant. When words are used without care, they can

[558] Korzybski, A. (1933) Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics. Institute of General Semantics.

distort public discourse and reinforce systems of misunderstanding. But when language is used with precision and awareness, it becomes a tool for sanity, clarity, and shared understanding.

Distortion of perception

Alfred Korzybski's theory of general semantics begins with a simple observation: humans do not react to the world as it is, but to how they perceive and label it. His work, particularly in 'Science and Sanity' (1933), argues that this labelling process—where words stand in for things—often leads to distortions in thinking, behaviour, and communication. What people take as reality is often an abstract map of experience, not the territory itself. When that map is mistaken for the territory, confusion, misjudgement, and emotional overreaction follow. General semantics is not a philosophy or formal science. Rather, it is a method for examining how language mediates thought and perception. Its aim is practical: to sharpen awareness of how language influences behaviour. Korzybski believed that many human problems, including emotional imbalance and social conflict, could be traced to confusion in language use. For him, words are not neutral labels—they shape how reality is interpreted. One of the central ideas in general semantics is that language works through abstraction. This process involves filtering raw experience into symbols and categories. But people often forget they are dealing with abstractions and act as if the word is the thing itself. Korzybski described this as 'identification', a mental error where different levels of abstraction are conflated. When someone hears the word 'lemon' and salivates, they are reacting not to an object but to a symbol with deep sensory associations. In more complex situations, such as politics or relationships, this confusion can lead to emotional manipulation, ideological bias, and dysfunctional behaviour. To combat this, Korzybski proposed the practice of 'consciousness of abstracting'. This means remaining aware that what is said or thought about the world is not the world itself. A label, no matter how precise, is still only a name. This awareness helps people avoid jumping to conclusions, misreading situations, or projecting past experiences onto present circumstances. It also encourages more measured and flexible responses, especially in emotionally charged situations. Korzybski introduced several techniques to help people internalise this awareness. One of these is 'indexing'—adding qualifiers to general terms to recognise uniqueness. For instance, instead of saying 'John is lazy', one might say 'John-2020' or 'John-in-math-class' to reflect context. Another is using 'etc'. to acknowledge that no statement can capture the full complexity of a subject. These small changes in language signal a deeper habit of thought: that knowledge is always incomplete and context-dependent. Another key concept in general semantics is the 'semantic reaction'. This refers to the automatic responses people have to certain words or phrases. These reactions are shaped by past experiences, cultural norms, and emotional associations. For example, words like 'freedom' or 'failure' can evoke strong feelings, not because of their actual meaning, but because of what they have come to represent for an individual or group. These responses often bypass critical thinking. Recognising and analysing them is crucial to regaining control over one's understanding and behaviour. Korzybski also emphasised that language distorts because it is inherently limited. No matter how advanced or refined, language is still an abstraction, a reduction of the rich complexity of lived experience. This is why he famously said, 'The map is not the territory'. The symbols used to represent reality are not reality itself. This insight, simple as it seems, has profound implications for how knowledge is constructed, how decisions are made, and how conflicts emerge. General semantics seeks to train people to resist the lure of fixed meanings. In politics, religion, and everyday life, language often becomes rigid and ceremonial. Words become weapons or shields, detached from direct experience. This encourages dogma, prejudice, and systemic misunderstanding. Korzybski's approach urges people to slow down, to notice how language

frames experience, and to develop habits of flexibility and revision. In a time when media, algorithms, and ideological messaging shape perception on a global scale, Korzybski's ideas remain urgent. The misuse of language does not merely confuse individual minds—it shapes collective behaviour, deepens division, and fuels conflict. General semantics offers tools to become more conscious, more accurate, and more humane in the way reality is processed and shared.

Limitations of language in science

In his 1933 work 'Science and Sanity', Alfred Korzybski introduced general semantics as a response to the confusion and distortion caused by natural language. In 'Korzybski's Quest: A Deeper Look at the Limitations of Natural Language in Science[559]' Gerald Haslam, expands on this point, arguing that Korzybski's critique of everyday language stems from a deeper philosophical concern with how people understand the world. Natural language, he believed, is structurally incapable of representing complex, evolving phenomena without distorting them. His project was not merely linguistic but cognitive: to improve how humans think by changing the tools they use to process reality. Korzybski's concern was that natural languages impose static categories on a world in flux. Language reduces experience to simplified words that do not account for uniqueness, context, or change. Terms like 'tree' or 'man' suggest fixed, universal qualities when the actual entities they describe are constantly shifting. This process of reduction can be useful for communication, but it misleads people into believing that their labels reflect the full truth. Korzybski saw this confusion between word and object as the root of many human errors. He claimed that words are maps—representations, not reality itself. And just as a map cannot contain the full texture of a landscape, a word cannot embody the complexity of an experience. In scientific contexts, this linguistic imprecision becomes especially dangerous. Natural languages lack the structural clarity and flexibility required for accurate scientific modelling. Korzybski believed that even in physics or biology, where precision is valued, scientists still rely on ordinary language to frame their theories. This opens the door to distortion, where abstract models are mistaken for concrete facts. Science demands a language that can account for probability, uncertainty, and multiplicity—features that rigid Aristotelian logic and traditional grammar often suppress. To resolve this problem, Korzybski proposed abandoning Aristotelian logic in favour of what he called a 'non-Aristotelian' system. This system would embrace degrees, relationships, and constant revision rather than binary oppositions and fixed truths. It would encourage awareness of abstraction, helping people recognise that every term is a product of selection and omission. Korzybski called this awareness 'consciousness of abstracting'. It involves a mental shift where one becomes aware of how meaning is constructed, rather than if words correspond directly to facts. Haslam emphasises that Korzybski's aim was not to discard natural language but to supplement it with a more refined method. He encouraged practices such as indexing (e.g., referring to 'dog1', 'dog2', etc.) and dating ('John-2022' vs. 'John-2024') to remind speakers that no concept remains stable across time or context. These techniques slow down the automatic identification that leads people to confuse categories with realities. In Korzybski's view, refining language would lead to more accurate perception and more responsible behaviour. Korzybski's 'map-territory' distinction remains one of his most enduring contributions. He insisted that many social and psychological problems arise when individuals respond to verbal descriptions instead of actual experiences. By mistaking the symbol for the thing, people act on flawed assumptions,

[559] Haslam, G. (1970) 'Korzybski's Quest: A Deeper Look at the Limitations of Natural Language in Science', ETC: A Review of General Semantics, 27(1), pp. 38–46.

reinforcing bias and emotional reactivity. Scientific language, if built with greater care and nuance, could resist this distortion. Haslam points out that general semantics was Korzybski's attempt to offer tools for this resistance—tools not just for scientists but for anyone trying to think clearly in a noisy, abstracted world. Korzybski was not simply a critic of language but an optimist about human potential. He believed that people could train themselves to be more accurate, more grounded, and less misled by linguistic shortcuts. General semantics was his way of enabling that transformation. By making people aware of the limits of their words, he hoped to help them see more of reality—and behave more sanely in response to it. In conclusion, Haslam's account of Korzybski's project reveals its lasting significance. The critique of natural language in science is only the beginning. Korzybski's larger goal was to revolutionise how people relate to reality itself by changing the structure of their communication. His vision remains relevant in a world still governed by abstractions, categories, and distortions.

Circularity of human knowledge

Human knowledge never moves in a straight line. It spirals. It feeds back into itself, shaped by abstraction, language, and inference. At the core of Alfred Korzybski's theory of general semantics is this recognition: humans do not access reality directly. Instead, they move through layers of abstraction, each shaped by language, thought, and perception. The world is filtered through the nervous system, reduced by language, and reorganised in symbols. This filtering process, while necessary, introduces distortion at every stage. Yet it is also the only way humans can navigate reality. Korzybski described how electro-colloidal processes in the nervous system operate on a submicroscopic level. Humans do not perceive these directly. What people recognise as 'objective reality' is already the result of earlier abstractions. These are sensations, feelings, observations—all non-verbal and shaped by previous experiences. As abstraction continues, language enters. This brings labelling, inference, and eventually, speech about speech. At this point, communication is no longer about reality itself, but about previous interpretations of that reality. The further one travels in this cycle, the further one moves from direct experience. Despite this complexity, inferential knowledge often proves more reliable than raw perception. As Korzybski noted, sense data alone are insufficient. Science demands hypothesis, testing, and revision. Older generalisations must be updated considering new discoveries. Inference allows for this kind of progress. But it also deepens the circularity of knowledge. Humans are constantly projecting their highest abstractions onto nature, then reading those projections back as if they were inherent features of the world. They create models, see those models reflected, and conclude that their models are accurate. This cycle makes understanding possible but also limits what can be known. The structure of language contributes to this feedback loop. As Edward Sapir pointed out, humans experience the world in large part through the habits of their linguistic communities. People do not see reality directly. They see what their language allows them to see. This problem becomes more visible when societies become larger and more complex. In small communities, language tends to remain close to lived experience. But in mass societies, language becomes abstract, bureaucratic, and symbolic. Words become further detached from what they describe. The result is discommunication—not merely failed communication, but systemic misunderstanding built into language itself. Lawrence Frank described this shift as a movement from static categories to dynamic processes. Feedback replaces linear cause and effect. Modern science increasingly recognises this. Terms like servomechanism and self-regulating system reflect the same principle: that understanding depends on feedback. This is not just true for machines, but for people. Korzybski extended this idea to his concept of time-binding—the uniquely human

capacity to build knowledge across generations. Time-binding is itself a feedback process. Humans inherit language and culture, alter it, and pass it on. But this spiralling transmission also locks them into patterns of abstraction and distortion. They are shaped by the very knowledge they produce. This view demands a new way of understanding humans—not as isolated minds or biological organisms, but as whole beings embedded in linguistic, cultural, and neuro-semantic environments. To change how humans think, they must change how they speak. But this change is not easy. As Alexis Carrel warned, man must remake himself and cannot do so without pain. Language, identity, and thought are interwoven. Altering one requires reshaping the others. It is a recursive process. Arthur Eddington described this cycle poetically. The furthest reach of science, he wrote, returns us to ourselves. When people investigate the unknown, they see the reflection of the mind that framed the question. Human knowledge is a mirror. What is learnt about the world also reveals something about the knower. As science progresses, it does not simply uncover objective truth—it rediscovers the assumptions and symbols placed into nature to begin with. This is the paradox and the beauty of the human condition. The map is not the territory. The word is not the thing. Yet without these abstractions, knowledge would not be possible. Humans are caught in a loop. But by understanding the loop—its structure, its distortions, its feedback—they can move through it with greater awareness.

The structure of linguistic revolutions

Scientific revolutions do not emerge from orderly progress. They erupt from crises, from a sense that prevailing assumptions no longer explain the world. Thomas Kuhn famously described this process in 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', showing how new paradigms arise not through accumulation of facts but through a break with old structures. In 'Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture[560]', Chris Knight applies this concept to the birth of human language and symbolic culture. He argues that the emergence of language was itself a revolutionary break—a cultural rupture, not a slow biological drift. For Knight, the origin of language is not a technical innovation like tool-making. It is a social event, born of resistance and solidarity. Language is a collective act, a shared fiction that binds people together. It allows for deception, abstraction, memory, and projection. But it enables a shared world to exist. This world is not just material—it is symbolic. It contains roles, taboos, promises, and laws. To speak is not just to name but to invoke a whole framework of expectations. Language transforms perception into narrative, biology into culture. Knight emphasises that this symbolic breakthrough was not gradual. It happened in a burst—what he calls a 'human revolution'. Anatomically modern humans existed for thousands of years before they left behind any evidence of symbolic thought. Then, suddenly, in the Upper Paleolithic, cave paintings, burial rites, tools, and social structures appear. This is not evolution by inches. It is revolution—a transformation of how humans relate to each other and the world. And at the core of this revolution is language. This theory challenges traditional evolutionary narratives, especially those rooted in Darwinian gradualism. Language did not evolve the way eyesight or opposable thumbs did. It emerged from a cultural shift, one bound up with ritual, cooperation, and resistance. Knight locates its origin in the collective actions of early women, who used ritualised sexual withdrawal to gain leverage over male aggression. These rituals, grounded in solidarity, became structured through symbolic behaviour. Menstruation, taboo, and myth became the foundation for a shared social order. Language, in this view, did not arise from isolated individuals grunting more efficiently—it was born from the need to coordinate

[560] Knight, C. (1991) Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture, Yale University Press.

collective action through symbolic means. This revolutionary approach reframes how we think about the relationship between biology and culture. It insists that culture—symbolic behaviour, shared language, ritual order—was not a result of slow biological refinement. Rather, culture initiated the refinement. In this sense, language preceded the modern human mind. The invention of shared symbolic codes changed the way people thought, felt, and lived. It created humans as social, symbolic beings. Just as Kuhn described scientific paradigms as defining the boundaries of what counts as knowledge, linguistic revolutions define what counts as reality. Once a new symbolic system is in place, older modes of thought seem absurd or invisible. This is the power of language—it does not just reflect the world, it creates it. And like scientific paradigms, languages are conservative. They resist change. But anomalies—contradictions, unspoken tensions—can accumulate, forcing a breakdown. This, too, leads to linguistic revolutions. Knight's theory also helps explain why anthropology struggles to find consensus. Unlike physics or chemistry, anthropology has no stable paradigm. Its object—human culture—is inherently symbolic, and therefore deeply political. Competing models of kinship, ritual, or social organisation often reflect broader ideological battles. Malinowski's defence of the nuclear family, for instance, was not a neutral observation but a political stance. By contrast, Engels argued that early human society was based on collective solidarity, not patriarchal domination. These are not just competing hypotheses; they are rival narratives about what it means to be human. Knight sides with Engels. He argues that early culture was not built on private property or male authority, but on shared rituals that redistributed power. The nuclear family, in this model, is not the origin of culture but its later distortion. It represents a retreat from collective forms of social organisation. The revolution that created symbolic culture was not just cognitive—it was political, grounded in the redistribution of power among genders and generations. In this sense, the story of human origins is not merely about the past. It is about the present crisis. Capitalist modernity, with its emphasis on competition, ownership, and domination, has obscured the memory of human solidarity. But the symbolic capacity that once allowed people to imagine new forms of life still exists. A new linguistic revolution is possible—one that reclaims speech as a tool of cooperation rather than control. Language began as resistance. It began to turn biology into culture, violence into ritual, hierarchy into shared meaning. If humanity is to face the challenges of ecological collapse, alienation, and inequality, it must once again reinvent its language—and with it, its world.

Global language of discommunication

Alfred Korzybski's theory of general semantics emerged as a response to a growing realisation: language does not merely describe reality—it shapes and distorts it. His concept of semantic distortion emphasised that every word is an abstraction, and every abstraction separates people further from the reality it tries to convey. In his book 'Science and Sanity', Korzybski argued that this is not an accident, but an inherent feature of language. The larger the society, the greater the abstraction. And the greater the abstraction, the more inevitable the disconnection between words and things, people and meaning, thought and reality. In small communities, language often stays grounded in shared experience. Words have roots in daily life, relationships, and place. But as language scales to accommodate larger and more complex societies, it becomes detached. The need to communicate across vast distances, to govern large populations, or to build institutions introduces a form of speech that is increasingly abstract, technical, and depersonalised. This transformation is not just linguistic—it is political and psychological. The more people rely on abstract language, the easier it becomes to shape, control, and manipulate them through words. And the further language drifts from lived experience, the more it becomes a tool for discommunication. Discommunication, in this

context, is not simply a failure to understand. It is the creation of systemic misunderstanding—communication that appears coherent but obscures, confuses, or dominates. Korzybski's idea that the 'map is not the territory' illustrates this. Language is a map, a model of reality, not reality itself. But when people begin to act as if their linguistic models are real, they are no longer speaking about the world—they are speaking about their speech. This recursive disconnection becomes more dangerous in a globalised world, where powerful institutions use language to manufacture consensus, erase difference, and dissolve local cultures. Natural language fails under the weight of modern complexity. Global systems require global language—generalised, standardised, and efficient. But such language cannot represent the diversity and richness of local life. It suppresses nuance, emotion, and context. What remains is a vocabulary of management, optimisation, and governance. In the name of clarity, it removes ambiguity, and with that, much of what makes communication human. The global language of discommunication is now embedded in international law, bureaucratic systems, digital platforms, and media. It uses abstraction to command, statistics to persuade, and technical jargon to exclude. This kind of language does not tolerate smallness—small truths, small groups, or small cultures. It flattens differences to control them. And in doing so, it not only distorts reality but begins to distort society itself. Real communities become untranslatable. Their customs, dialects, and memories are replaced by the vocabulary of progress, development, and regulation. Korzybski believed that such distortions could be overcome through a new kind of awareness—what he called 'consciousness of abstracting'. This meant recognising that every word is a choice, every sentence a selection, every theory a simplification. Language, then, becomes a field of responsibility. But in a system driven by mass communication, economic control, and digital speed, this awareness is increasingly rare. Instead, language becomes a tool for simulation. It creates the illusion of understanding without requiring real encounter. It replaces thinking with repetition, and memory with data. The global spread of discommunication also carries a moral weight. It erodes the foundations of mutual recognition and shared experience. The more people speak in abstractions, the less they can truly hear one another. Language loses its grounding in the body, in the land, in the face of the other. It becomes unmoored. And this unmooring prepares the ground for social fragmentation, loneliness, and cultural homogenisation. In Korzybski's view, this was not inevitable. His work was a warning and a guide. Semantic distortions may be inevitable in language, but they are not beyond our control. The challenge is to create forms of speech that remain close to reality, that protect the integrity of thought, and that serve the needs of communities rather than systems. If this challenge is ignored, the result will not be more understanding, but mass misunderstanding on a global scale—more noise disguised as clarity, more control disguised as communion.

A possibility once is a necessity forever

'If it is possible to misrefer once, then that possibility must be accounted for in the necessity of the system'.

—Saul Kripke, Naming and Necessity[561]

The phrase 'a possibility once is a necessity forever' captures a deep structural insight into language, meaning, and interpretation—one that resonates profoundly with the work of Jacques Derrida and, in a different register, with Saul Kripke. Though neither thinker may have written these exact words, the phrase condenses central tenets of their philosophies. For Derrida, the notion speaks directly to his theory of 'iterability', which posits that any mark or sign must be

[561] Kripke, S. (1980) Naming and Necessity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

repeatable to function. But this repeatability—this possibility of recurrence outside of its original context—is also what opens the sign to distortion, misunderstanding, and misuse. In this sense, the capacity for miscommunication is not a failure of language but its very condition. What can happen once—the slip, the drift, the error—is not merely an accident; it becomes structurally inscribed in the system as a permanent possibility, and thus a necessity. In 'Limited Inc.[562]', Derrida shows that every act of communication is haunted by this doubleness: the sign can function because it can be detached from its origin, and therefore it can never be completely pinned to an intention or context. He writes, '...the possibility of the mark being repeated is the condition of its possibility but also of its impossibility'. This formulation reveals how the very mechanisms that allow meaning to be transmitted also guarantee its fragility. The moment a sign can mean, it can also mismean. Once the system admits that possibility, it cannot be undone; it becomes a necessary feature of the system itself. This is why, for Derrida, iterability undermines any clean opposition between meaning and non-meaning, communication and miscommunication, success, and failure. A related concern appears in Kripke's 'Naming and Necessity', though with different emphases. Kripke argues against descriptivist theories of reference and develops the idea of rigid designators—names that refer to the same object in all worlds. Yet even here, the possibility of misreference (for instance, using a name incorrectly in a causal-historical chain) reveals essential tensions in how language functions. Misreference is not merely an error to be corrected; it exposes the structure by which naming, identity, and intention are sustained. If misreference is possible once, then the system must accommodate it permanently. The logic is modal: possibility, once admitted, becomes an enduring necessity. Thus, whether in Derrida's exploration of writing, context, and meaning, or Kripke's analysis of naming and reference, the underlying idea remains: the singular occurrence of deviation or failure is never merely episodic. It marks a permanent feature of the system. What happens once is not incidental—it is foundational. The possibility of rupture is not peripheral to language, but constitutive of it. Once the system makes room for even the slightest displacement, it must carry that possibility forward forever. If the dangerous function of language—its capacity for failure, misreference, or deceit—is always structurally possible, then discommunication is not an accident but an inevitable outcome. In a closed linguistic system where every utterance carries the potential for deviation, the process tends not toward clarity, but toward entropy. Miscommunication, distortion, and semantic drift are not exceptions to the rule; they are the rule's logical conclusion. Over time, meaning breaks down—not through external force but through internal accumulation of interpretive noise. This entropic collapse is not merely theoretical; it underlies the planned obsolescence of language itself. As words circulate, they wear out, lose force, and become instruments of manipulation or confusion. The promise of communication becomes its undoing. In this view, the system cannot remain stable. The very features that allow language to function also guarantee its decay. Thus, the obsolescence of meaning is not only foreseeable—it is necessary. When discommunication forms a closed circuit, knowledge chases its own shadow, and truth turns into its opposite. What may mismean once must mismean forever; the crack in the word becomes the shape of the world.

Language alienates from the self

Language, rather than revealing the self, often obscures it. The moment a thought is expressed, it slips away from its origin. Gigla Gonashvili, in his philosophical reflections[563] on

[562] Derrida, J. (1988) Limited Inc. Translated by S. Weber. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
[563] Gonashvili, G. (2025) 'Language alienates us from the self: Derrida, Artaud, and the performance of the self', IAI.tv, 28 July. Available at: https://iai.tv/articles/language-alienates-us-from-the-self-auid-3270 (Accessed: 30 July 2025).

Derrida and Artaud, argues that alienation is not merely social or psychological—it is embedded in thought itself. Even Descartes' famous phrase 'I think, therefore I am' is not a declaration of certainty, but the beginning of a rupture. Who is this 'I' that thinks? The self is already fractured, already performing a version of itself shaped by external forces. This alienation, Gonashvili reminds us, has deep historical roots. The word 'alienation' comes from the Latin alius, meaning 'other'. Originally a legal term for the transfer of property, it evolved to signify mental estrangement. By the time of Descartes, it hinted at a disturbance in thought itself. In post-Enlightenment France, alienation became a major theme in both psychiatry and philosophy—especially for thinkers like Marx, who saw the worker estranged from labour, and for Derrida, who found alienation even in the structures of reason. Derrida's reading of Descartes challenges the idea that the cogito ('I think') excludes madness. It is asserted in full knowledge that madness could dissolve even this certainty. Likewise, his analysis of Antonin Artaud reveals the painful paradox of language: the more urgently we try to express ourselves, the more we feel ourselves disappear. In Artaud's letters and writings, especially in his theatre work, language is not a bridge to the self—it is a battlefield. Words carry the promise of creation but also the wound of division. Artaud speaks of a 'vicious will' that corrodes meaning at its root. Every act of writing is at once an effort to affirm existence and an experience of being torn from it. Artaud's breakdowns, institutionalisations, and linguistic experiments—especially his use of glossolalia and invented, unspeakable words—were not signs of mental collapse but expressions of a struggle to reclaim an authentic self. His neologisms, like 'draorg' or 'ratara', seem meaningless, but they resist the generalising power of conventional speech. These are not mere symbols; they are attempts to assert that 'I am here', even when language fails. His writings suggest that true expression is performative—it must be lived, enacted, even suffered. This idea also touches Derrida's view of language: before one can speak, there is already rupture, otherness, a structure of absence. Our names, genders, and social roles precede us; we are named before we know how to name ourselves. Even the French phrase 'je m'appelle' ('I call myself') hints at the impossibility of true ownership over identity. This symbolic alienation leads to the performance of multiple selves: different voices, masks, and personas that never quite cohere. Today, as artificial intelligence and language models simulate conversation and meaning, this crisis intensifies. All our knowledge is rendered instantly available, yet the origin—the speaking subject—fades. Authentic alienation, Derrida suggests, lies not in despair but in allowing spontaneous thought to surface, however unstable. One response, as Gonashvili notes, is to reclaim expression through personal writing, such as journaling. Even this, though, risks falling into uniformity unless we remember: the self speaks with many tongues. Language alienates us from the self—but it also gestures toward a more complex truth. To live in language is to perform the self, not find it. Yet it is only through this painful process that one might glimpse something genuine. At the end in most cases, 'us' is a linguistic creation because one cannot speak all the time from the name of the others. As a tool for creating this imaginary 'us', the language alienates the speaker from his body and others around. Heidegger said, 'Language is the house of being' yet the official language is more like an apartment block in a ghetto than a house. 'Home is where the family is' reminds us that belonging and closeness to others—not mere walls—make a true home. Language is a construction, family is people. Real home and a decent life arise from simple dialects spoken among kin, not from the sterile exactness of written rules. Love does not need grammar.

Unformulable self

In 'Human Personality'(1943), Simone Weil critiques the modern exaltation of 'personality' and 'rights' as central moral values. She argues that focusing on the 'person'—with

its desires, opinions, and linguistic self-construction—distracts from what is sacred in the human being. What is truly sacred, according to Weil, is the impersonal, the anonymous part of the soul that is capable of attention, compassion, and contact with truth. She contends that language reinforces personality by fixing identity and mediating all experience through signs. But language is inherently inadequate; it abstracts and limits thought. As she puts it, even the most rigorous thoughts may be unformulable in words, though they are perfectly clear. The sacred, then, lies outside language, in silence and attention. Weil also critiques the emphasis on legalistic rights and social recognition. These are based on 'personality', and therefore on ego, comparison, and conflict. What is needed instead is a moral vision rooted in compassion for affliction, attention to others, and obedience to a higher, impersonal good. Her alternative to the cult of personality is a mystical ethics of attention: the capacity to see another's suffering and respond, not through ideology or theory, but through a stripped-down, silent form of presence. At best, a mind confined by language is imprisoned, limited by the number of relations that words can hold together at once. It remains blind to thoughts that lie beyond language—thoughts that are rigorous and clear but unformulable. Trapped within this enclosure, the mind moves in a space of partial truths, never able even to glimpse what lies outside. Within this narrow frame, the modern obsession with 'rights' appears hollow. Rights are sterile; they stir no real impulse to act. Only the word 'obligation' carries the weight of authenticity, speaking to something beyond personal claim. To love another fully is not to assert one's personality, but to ask with genuine attention: 'What are you going through?' The eternal element of the soul is impersonal, defined by pure attention freed from desire. To reach it requires decreation—not destruction, but the undoing of creation, a return from the formed to the formless, where the soul gives up selfhood to make room for truth. Weil's central message is deeply countercultural: that true moral and spiritual life begins when one abandons the ego, suspends language, and directs silent, loving attention toward others and the good. 'Human Personality' is one of her most provocative and unsettling meditations on the limits of language, identity, and moral life. In this essay, she famously argues that the concept of 'personality' is an illusion and even a potential source of evil—not because the human individual is unimportant, but because reducing the soul to a 'person' enclosed in language, rights, and ego distorts its deeper reality. The being, at its deepest, cannot be fully captured in language—it is beyond articulation, residing beyond the reach of words and concepts. The self is unformulable. Only in silence, attention, and the undoing of the ego does this hidden self begin to speak.

'At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in prison. It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number. These thoughts are outside language, they are unformulable, although they are perfectly rigorous and clear and although every one of the relations they involve is capable of precise expression in words. So, the mind moves in a closed space of partial truth, which may be larger or smaller, without ever being able so much as to glance at what is outside'.

–Simone Weil, Human Personality

Closing questions:

1. When language becomes a performance devoid of presence, can speech still carry the weight of reality?

2. If all utterance is shaped by structure, bias, or automation, is there any space left for a truly human voice?

3. Can communication still serve communion, or has it become merely the ritual of coordinated isolation?

4. In a world where connection is constant, but comprehension is absent, is discommunication the hidden cost of visibility?

5. What happens to meaning when even silence has been colonised by systems of response?

6. If discommunication simulates dialogue while deepening disconnection, how does one begin to speak otherwise?

7. When language operates without intention, interpretation, or shared ground, is miscommunication still an error—or a design?

8. How can one resist discommunication without retreating into silence or cynicism?

9. If language now reproduces systems more than it reveals selves, where does speech end and surveillance begin?

10. Is it possible to dismantle the machinery of discommunication using the very language it has emptied?

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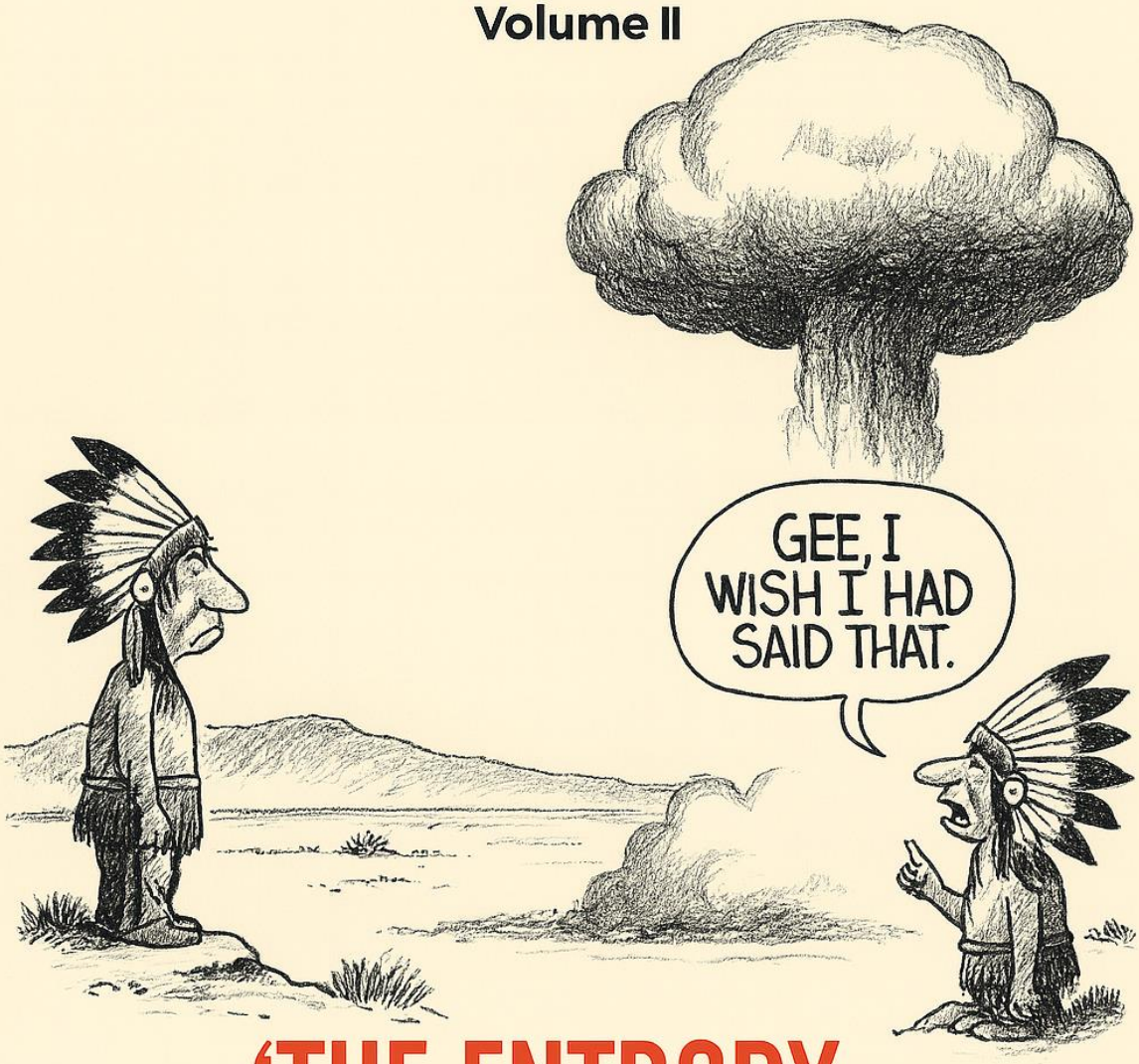
"The Entropy of Communication, The Planned Obsolescence of Language Vol. II."

THE PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE OF LANGUAGE

"Miscommunication Trilogy'
Volume II



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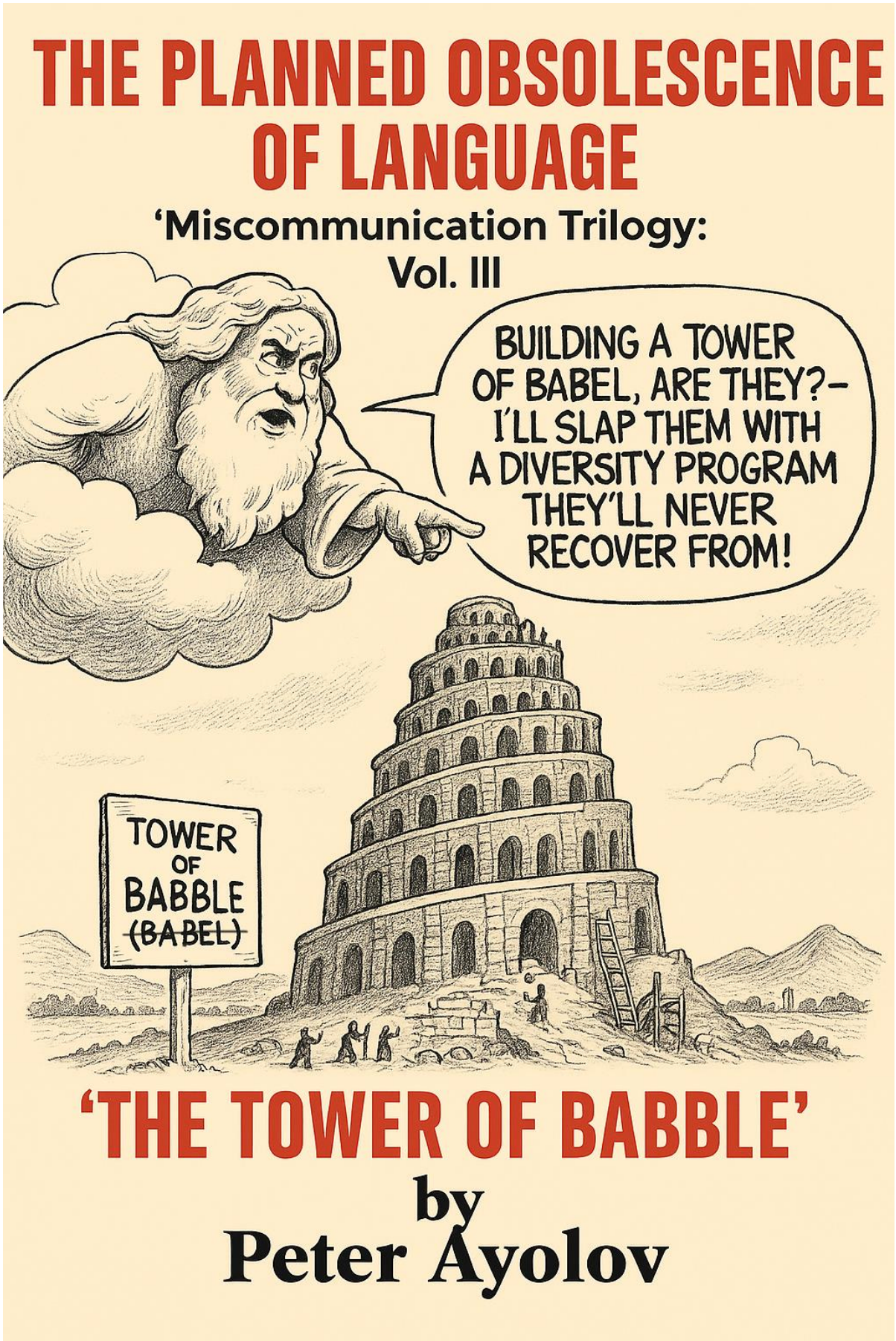
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